

Literary Body Discourses.
Corporeality, Gender and Class Difference in Contemporary Chinese Women's Poetry
and Fiction.

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by Justyna Jaguścik

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Prof. Dr. Andrea Riemenschnitter (main advisor)
Prof. Dr. Lidia Kasarekło
Prof. Dr. Bettina Dennerlein

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Literary body turn

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the topic of the body gained prominence in Chinese literature and academic discourse. After the ferment of Maoist mobilisation had come to its end, the previously unquestioned domination of the revolutionary body proper lost much of its ideological foundation. Consequently, the biological, sensual body, which was formerly often rendered invisible by the hegemonic aesthetics of corporeal sacrifice and asceticism, emerged as a new focal point of the cultural production of the 1980s.

Contributing to the intellectual agitation of this decade, female authors who “surfaced onto the horizon of history” (Meng & Dai 1989) in the post-Mao era attempted to gain control of both the language and representations of the previously repressed, or thoroughly displaced, female body experience. Since the 1980s their “body narrations” (身体叙事 *shenti xushi*) have been recognised and gradually explored as delineating possible areas of emancipation by writers and critics alike.

These critical attempts to scrutinise, to literally and theoretically overwrite or subvert cultural representations of women from the earlier Republican and Mao era (1911-1976) were advanced simultaneously by tapping not only the cultural resources of local intellectuals but also those gleaned from translated works and related Western feminist standpoints. The existing Chinese women’s movement, influenced by comprehensive translations of Western feminist writing and supported by already established indigenous traditions and social practices, was the driving force behind an ongoing deconstruction of various sets of images relating to “modern women” which had emerged in Republican China and in Maoist iconography. Logically then, the post-Mao *body turn* in women’s literature may be conceptualised as a consequence of an encounter which transpired in an increasingly translocal intellectual context. The nature of this encounter has been deeply influenced by the chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) of the *post* as it may be found in the conceptual frames of *postcolonialism*, *postsocialism*, *postfeminism* and *postmodernism*. Subsequently, the uneasy dialogue between different locally orientated feminisms has triggered complex processes of cultural translations and identity negotiations. These have resulted in the staging of distinctive feminist subject positionalities, which must be viewed and discussed from the perspective of

their historical and affective (Shih 2002: 115-116) embeddedness.¹

Since the 1980s, female subjectivity and agency in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been reconceptualised by several female authors in a process of self-questioning which has led to the emergence of a distinct body of texts. Starting with women's poetry (女性诗歌 *nüxing shige*)² of the 1980s and 1990s, the female body experience became the focal point of the writing of numerous authors. This turn in literature challenged traditional and revolutionary literary canons in which the human body had been oftentimes a mere marker of social or class status. The emerging narratives of the body created a new semiotic space, consequently empowering a shift of meaning in the perception of femininity and the female body experience. Furthermore, they inspired novel theoretical approaches, which triggered discussions and negotiations of the possible renderings of female sex / femininity (女性 *nüxing*), woman (妇女 *funü*), sex / sex difference (性别 *xingbie*) / gender (社会性别 *shehui xingbie*), and feminism (女权主义 *nüquanzhuyi*). Revisions of feminism in the post-Mao period by writers, academics and activists have finally resulted in the reconceptualisation of feminism as *nüxingzhuyi* (女性主义), which may be understood as feminism foregrounding the significance of sex / gender difference and the power relations inscribed therein.

Gender: established category of analysis between West and East?

Since the 1980s, research-orientated endeavours, influenced by the perspectives of women's and gender studies, have ensconced the topic within the academic field of Chinese Studies in many parts of the world.³ Departing from the establishment of women's studies, they now include masculinity, gender and queer studies. The scientific base was built in the 1970s and

¹ The notion of "cultural translation", as applied here, is informed by the following references: Shih 2002, Chow 2008 and Spakovski 2011.

² In general, I translate *nüxing shige* as women's poetry and not feminine poetry. In distinct justified cases *nüxing* will be rendered as female or feminine. The application of these alternative translations is in accordance with the discussion of Christine Battersby's *Phenomenal Woman* in Young: "As I reconstruct the distinction, the "feminine" signifies a relational position in a dichotomy, masculine/feminine, where the first is more highly valued than the second, and where the second is partly defined as a lack with respect to the first. This dichotomy lines up with others that a homologous hierarchical logic, such as mind/body, reason/passion, public/private, hard science/soft science (...). As contrasted with the female, and logically connected to this semiotic operation, I conceive the feminine also as a set of normatively disciplined expectations imposed on female bodies by male-dominated society" (Young 2005: 5).

³ For a survey of over 650 English-language works in the fields of humanities and social sciences on Chinese women in the twentieth century alone, consult Hershatter 2007. See also Barlow 2003 and Hershatter 2004, 2008. For a bibliography of studies on women in China in Western languages, see Yates 2009.

1980s with milestone publications edited by historians and social scientists, such as Marilyn B. Young's (1973) or Margery Wolf's and Roxanne Witke's (1975), which documented the budding interest in Chinese women's history and present in Western academia. These early examples inspired the works of Elizabeth Croll (1978) and Ono Kazuko (1989), who both focused on entanglements between feminism and revolution in twentieth century China. Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter's joint publication (1988) questioned critically the socialist version of women's emancipation. The authors introduced at the same time new methodological approaches into studies of Chinese women's history, such as personal interviews and oral histories. These works, along with Ruby Watson and Patricia Ebrey's historical contribution on the institution of marriage (1991), all belong to the period of research focused on women and do not directly touch upon the issue of masculinity. An interest in men's studies and the topic of manhood arose in the 1990s. Major publications by Xueping Zhong (2000), and Susan Brownell (2002) granted an extensive insight into varying renderings and means of social constructions of masculinity and femininity throughout the ages. A special issue of the journal *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* published in 2010 sought to provoke a discussion on queer Chinese politics in a transnational context.⁴

A notable contribution to the subject of representations was provided by two collections of articles. The first one, edited by Tani Barlow (1993), included Meng Yue's 孟悦 essay on female images and nationalist imagery. In her article, Meng analysed politically inspired female "images" (representations) in socialist literature after 1949. According to Meng, these images did not freely explore and display the liberating potential of the newly available gendered subject positionalities. She points rather to the objectification and (ab)use of female images as means of implementation of the nation-state's political agenda.

One year later (1994) and in cooperation with Angela Zito, Tani Barlow edited the second volume of essays dedicated to the topic of representation. The historian Angela Zito, together with Robert Ames, are two of the very few authors who deal with the concept of physicality and corporeality in Chinese culture. Their contributions to the field of religious studies and history provide an insight into the previously seldom explored meanings that have been attributed to the human body.

⁴ Transnationality is understood as follows: "By 'transnationalism' we mean to signal a historical moment in which activities, identities, theories, and cultural productions self-consciously position themselves both within and beyond the nation-state. [...] Our use of 'transnationalism' does not mean to indicate that the world has become interconnected only in the last few decades or that a singular world or 'Empire' has now come into existence. Indeed, there have been and continue to be multiple, interconnected worlds. Each location has its own history and its own stories to tell" (Rofel & Liu 2010: 282-283). For more see the guest editors, Lisa Rofel and Petrus Liu's, "Introduction" (Ibid.: 281-289), and Rofel's article on "queering Asian studies" (2012: 183-193).

In the closing part of her later publication, Zito (1997) inquired into embodiments of rituals and the discursive production of various gendered subject positions under the rule of the Qing dynasty. Barlow focused on research covering issues of feminism and representation of femininity in China, a fact that is reflected in the title of her significant publication *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (2004).

For an interdisciplinary reflection on the meanings of corporeality within Chinese culture, two publications are highly valuable. Wu Hong and Katherine Tsiang (2005) edited a volume of essays on differing conceptualisations of body and face in Chinese visual culture, which explores historical representations of the human body as equally conditioned by indigenous traditions and socio-cultural interactions. Another collection of essays, edited by Fran Martin and Larissa Heinrich (2006), discussed links between concepts of embodiment and cultural or sexual identity. It can be seen furthermore that secondary literature dedicated to the topics of Chinese traditional medicine and legislative regulations oftentimes critically questions the stability of gender categories in historical texts. For example, Mark Elvin (1984) or Charlotte Furth's (1999) contributions illustrated the differing ways in which bodies have come to matter throughout the ages. Shigehisa Kuriyama (2002) compared traditional understandings of the body in Western and Chinese medicine. Within the field of anthropology, two works by Ann Anagnost (1997) and Lisa Rofel (2004) thematised the productive powers of various hegemonic discourses, which establish, and subsequently enforce, proper and timely embodiments of what may be described as conventional subjects and individuals. While Anagnost focused on the construction of embodiments of classed subjects in the revolutionary period, Rofel explored the corporeal ideals enforced by the joint forces of globalisation and the capitalist system of production.

In the field of literary studies, works published by Lu Tonglin (1993, 1995) established an important orientation point for later re-readings of literature from a feminist or gendered perspective. In addition, Rey Chow's earlier important contribution (1991) exemplifies the critical potential hidden in the attempts to reread modern Chinese literature "between West and East" in a transnational, postcolonial setting.

In China, discussions of various humanist stances, along with the translation and introduction of examples of modernist aesthetics, were essential to the so-called "high culture fever" (Wang 1996) that struck the PRC in the late 1980s. Together with other literary works, the milestones of the Western⁵ feminist "canon" (understood mainly as the English-language,

⁵ I use the term "Western" here in the way it is mainly used in the PRC, where distinctions between Western

primarily U.S.-based body of writing) made their way to China in translations and retellings. For example, renditions of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (translated in 1986) and Bettie Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (translated in 1988) were published for the first time. Rising interest in Euro-American feminist concepts was accompanied by the rediscovery of Chinese women's emancipatory activism, which was consolidated in the twilight of the Qing era. This activism existed in various forms of political and cultural activities throughout the entire twentieth century. This interest in local cultural legacies resulted, for example, in a revised edition of Tan Zhengbi's 譚正璧 *Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shenghuo* (The literary life of Chinese women, 1930), which was republished in 1985 under the title *Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shi* (History of Chinese women's literature). In this period of theoretical and historical contextualization of Chinese women's studies, two milestone works by feminist scholars emerged respectively in 1988 and 1989: Li Xiaojiang's 李小江 *Xiawa de shentao* (Eve's exploration), followed by Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua's 戴锦华 *Fuchu zai lishi de dibiao* (Surfacing onto the horizon of history). These contributions are considered to have established the theoretical backbone of feminist critique in the PRC. Meng and Dai's publication, together with Dai's later book *Xingbie Zhongguo* (Gendering China, 2006), deliver an important insight into the politics of representations of femininity in visual and literary texts starting from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The introduction of women's studies (妇女研究 *funü yanjiu*) to the PRC was accompanied by intense academic exchange and cooperation between feminist scholars in the West and their counterparts in China. These resulted in the emergence of various institutionalised and semi-institutionalised transnational contact zones, such as the conference "Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State" hosted in 1992 by Harvard University and Wellesley College in the USA, the workshop "Women in Republican China" organised by the Free University of Berlin in 2002, or the establishment of the US-based Chinese Society for Women Studies (CSWS). In the meantime, a rich body of literature documenting from different standpoints the highly complex and sometimes uneasy nature of these encounters has become available on the "Western" as well as the "Chinese" side.⁶

Additionally, new tensions arose surrounding the naming of the emergent academic fields. As a consequence, division lines have become increasingly visible within the "feminist camp". Again, similar controversies appeared to those inherent to discussions about translation of

feminist theories become secondary to their origin from a Western industrialised or post-industrialised context.

⁶ See: Dai 1999, Li 1999, Shih 2002, Barlow 2004, Min 2005, 2007, Spakovski 2011.

Western feminist concepts. Li Xiaojiang's argumentation against gender studies, together with her thoughts on "interpretation and misinterpretation of some key terms" (1999: 272), delivers a suitable example:

The West's gender studies were developed on the foundation of women's studies. However, in China women's studies and gender studies cannot be made interchangeable or allowed to collapse into each other. (...) First, the former (women's studies) has a political nature, while the latter (gender studies) is purely academic. Second, the former is all about agency and subjectivity, and the latter is about methodology. Third, the former is a specialized study with a clear object of study, while the latter is a broadening of scholarly topics. Due to the fact that not long ago in Chinese history women disappeared in Chinese social life, consequently, not only is it necessary for women's studies to raise high its own banner, it must be especially on its guard against getting buried again in a gender studies that resemble the myth of 'men and women are all the same.' (Li 1999: 274-275)

The year 1995 represented, in the opinion of many authors (e.g. Xu Kun 徐坤 2004), the turning point in the development of women's and gender studies in the PRC. By hosting the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, they gained legitimacy through the internationally confirmed "politically correct" label. Since the mid 1990s, a sharp increase in numbers of publications and conferences can be observed, some of which deal with the works of individual authors or Chinese women's literature in general. Following Sun Shaoxian's 孙绍先 early work *Nüxingzhuyi wenxue* (Feminist literature) from 1987, important works were published in the field of gender-oriented literary critique as part of the preparation for the 1995 Conference. They influenced the advancement of feminist literary criticism in China over many years. They include, but are not limited to, the following works: Chen Shunxin's 陈顺馨 *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue xushu yu xingbie* (Narration and gender in contemporary Chinese literature, 1995), Lin Danya's 林丹娅 *Dangdai Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shilun* (The history of contemporary women's literature in China, 1995), Lin Shuming's 林树明 *Nüxingzhuyi wenxue piping zai Zhongguo* (The feminist literary criticism in China, 1995), and Dai Jinhua's *Jingcheng tuwei – nüxing, dianying, wenxue* (Breaking out of the city of mirrors: women, film, literature, 1995). In the same period, two important books that introduced translations of theoretical texts in the field of Western women's and gender studies were published. Bao Xiaolan 鲍小兰 edited a comprehensive introduction to Western feminism with reflections on the translation of key terms, *Xifang nüxingzhuyi yanjiu pingjia* (Critical approach to the Western feminist research, 1995). The second edition of Zhang Jingyuan's 张京媛 *Dangdai nüxingzhuyi wenxue piping* (Contemporary feminist literary critique, 1992) with translations of works by Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Jonathan Culler, Luce

Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Spivak and others, followed the same year. Zhang's foreword to the first edition mirrors the controversies that accompanied negotiations surrounding the translation of the term "feminism" into Chinese as *nüquanzhuyi* or, alternatively, *nüxingzhuyi* in the 1990s.

In addition, in 1995 four major anthologies of women's literature were published. They emerged under the following titles: *Hong lajiao nüxing wencong* ("Red chilies" anthology of women's literature) and *Hong yingsu wencong* ("Red poppies" anthology), ensued by the *Lan wazi congshu* ("Bluestockings" anthology of texts by foreign women writers) and *Jin hudie congshu* ("Golden butterflies" anthology, including works by women authors belonging to the Chinese diaspora). Furthermore, two separate collections of fiction and essays by women authors anthologised as *Tamen wenxue congshu* (Anthology of their literature) were published. In addition, several literary magazines published special "women's" issues.

In 2006 Dai Jinhua for the first time pointed to an important contribution of the 1995 UN Conference on Women. According to Dai, the Western feminist writings, previously introduced to China as translations in the late 1970s, were mainly those of white middle class female intellectuals. The articulation of feminism in terms of class and race differences remained conspicuously absent from these theories. As such they have proved exclusive and inadequate for the articulation of the subject proper of the Chinese women's movement. During the 1995 Conference issues of working and peasant women were however re-introduced as topics to the agenda of the mainly urban intellectual audience:

是 1995 年北京世界婦女大會的召開。這一歷史事件，造成了女性主義，社會性別理論在中國大陸的廣泛傳播，並相當有效地將中國勞動婦女，農村婦女的議題帶回到女性主義的論或與實踐之中。然而，這些議題的重新浮現與回歸，固然與持續惡化之中的中國婦女，尤其是底層婦女的生存狀況相關，但同時有著其背後諸如世界銀行及歐美大型國際基金會的資金流向的驅動。(Dai 2006: 25)

It was the convening of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women that led to the dissemination of feminist and gender theories in the PRC. Furthermore, it was also quite effective in re-addressing the issues of working and peasant women from the perspectives of feminist theory and practice. The re-emergence of these topics doubtlessly occurred in direct relation to the worsening existential situation of Chinese women, especially those from lower societal strata. It was however simultaneously backed and driven by funds pouring in from the World Bank and large, Western-based international foundations.

Dai is not the only theorist who points to the tense relationship between the local, leftist feminist tradition and re-introduced Western feminist concepts, which were translated among the crisis-driven intellectual discussions of the 1980s.

In search for a definition: theorising women's writing

Since 1995 women's literature has remained an important issue. The terms "feminism" and "women's literature" have been (vaguely) delineated and their translations adjusted to the current political agenda of those involved in the ongoing struggle over the mandate to represent "the Chinese women".⁷ Scholars from the field of literary studies engaged primarily in discussions about the social context of the appearance of an increasingly visible, distinct corpus of writing by women, designated by the term *nüxing* (feminine or women's) *wenxue*. It was mainly discussed in association with the alleged surfacing of post-Maoist women's self-consciousness (女性意识 *nüxing yishi*), its significant connotations were put into words by Li Xiaojiang:

With its powerful connotations of individuality, spontaneity, gender and sexuality, it would seem that *yishi* stands in rebellion against political consciousness (*juewu*). (1999: 274)

During the opening stage of discussions around the concept of "women's literature", critics at first showed comparatively little interest in interrogating the textual features of the new feminine rhetoric and poetics. Predominant views on women's literature agreed on an understanding of female authorship as grounded in the biological sex of the author, which furthermore engenders a distinct feminine consciousness and sensitivity. That is the opinion expressed, for example, by Sheng Ying 盛英 in her foreword, which opens the two volumes of the *Ershi shiji Zhongguo nüxing wenxue shi* (History of Chinese women's literature in the twentieth century, 1995).

According to Dai Jinhua, "women's writing" (女性写作 *nüxing xiezuò*) must be however defined primarily with regard to its significant embeddedness in cultural and social practices, and not only to the sex / gender difference. She prefers the term women's writing to the separateness of the distinct concepts of women's literature (*nüxing wenxue*) and women's poetry. In 1996 she argued for the superiority of women's writing over that of men (男性写作 *nanxing xiezuò*). This is, in Dai's opinion, the result of the still unrestrained character and flexibility inherent in women's writing. As it is not limited by any rigid conventional expectations, and has remained to date at best a fuzzy concept, consequently it remains

⁷ In this complex field of negotiations relating to the power over definitions, the following participants have remained visible: All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a mass organization set up in 1949, today often introduced as a government organised non-governmental organization (GONGO), Western Chinese scholars and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often backed the U.S. Ford Foundation, CSWS, academics and activists based in mainland China and members of the sinophone diaspora.

empowered to investigate dimensions that remain beyond the literary imagination of male authors (Dai, 1996).

Dai's latest book entirely devoted to women's literature of the 1980s, titled *Shedu zhi zhou* (Wading boat, first published in 2002), is an attempt to re-open the discussion on the characteristic features of women's writing. In this work Dai focuses on texts by female authors since the beginning of the reform era in China (1978).⁸ In the introduction to the book, Dai argues for a reexamination and the eventual abandonment of the over-determined term "women's literature" in favour of "women's writing". According to Dai, the reference to so-called "women's literature" may confusingly point to the following phenomena: literature by biological women, literature about women (especially those sympathising with or praising women), and literature written from feminine or feminist perspectives. Only in the case of the last two possibilities does the sex / gender identity of the writer remain insignificant. Dai regards all these potential definitions of women's literature as ambiguous and suspicious, as they can either point to subversive literary attempts, or to "Mulan-like" writing (花木兰式写作 *Hua Mulan shi xiezu*). With this last term Dai refers to writing by women, which however remains subjugated to masculine (or quasi-masculine) imagery. As a consequence, Dai accuses such women authors of rewriting and reinforcing gender bias. Furthermore, she criticises women's literature (conventionally understood as writing by, about or for women) for its inherent consolidation of images of essentialised femininity. These biologically-based representations are furthermore oftentimes linked to claims of existence of a distinct women's culture, which is however constrained by a scopic regime of "mirror walls" (镜城 *jingcheng*)⁹. A break with these representative conventions is possible only at enormous cost. Dai further states that due to the suppression of feminist thought in contemporary culture, women's literature has been defined in too narrow a sense. According to her, this narrow focus on expression of distinct feminine experience has consequently weakened the original emancipatory and subversive potential inherent in women's creativity.

For these reasons, Dai argues for the replacement of the concept of women's literature by that of women's writing. The latter is characterised by its focus on women's creative imagination and the emergence of a troublesome, contradictory women's culture, first by moments of

⁸ This publication includes separate chapters on Zhang Xinxin 张辛欣 (b. 1953), Wang Anyi 王安忆 (b. 1954), Tie Ning 铁凝 (b. 1957), Liu Suola 刘索拉 (b. 1955), Can Xue 残雪 (b. 1953), Liu Xihong 刘西鸿 (b. 1961), Fang Fang 方方 (b. 1955), and Chi Li 池莉 (b. 1957).

⁹ Interestingly, Dai's figure of the mirror wall recalls Luce Irigaray's "trenchant critique of the representation of women as the negative mirror reflection of men, and the need for women to burn those mirrors and despecularize themselves" (Shih 2007:18). This image appears as well in Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of origin and authenticity (Trinh 1989:22-23).

historical visibility of women's perspectives and stances, and finally by the search for traces of feminine body experience on the surface and in the fissures of the patriarchal culture (Dai 2007:18-19).

Concomitantly to the discussion around women's literature, the notion of women's poetry emerged in the late 1980s. It became an important subject of theoretical exchange between women poets and academics.¹⁰ Despite the fact that poetry was always considered a suitable genre for women in the classical tradition, women poets occupied a peripheral position in the literary canon (Yeh 1992, Dooling & Torgesson 1998: 1-39). For example, Michelle Yeh (1992) speaks of contemporary women poets' voices as "marginal discourse", positioning them on the selvedge of the literary margins (by which the lyrical genre itself is understood). Early critique dealing with contemporary Chinese women's poetry tended to place this heterogeneous concept at the intersection of Western literary influences, indigenous tradition and the output of social and political changes which took place in the post-Mao period. The emergence and consolidation of women's poetry has been primarily associated with the names of Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955), Lu Yimin 陆忆敏 (b. 1962), Tang Yaping 唐亚平 (b. 1962), and Yi Lei 伊蕾 (b. 1951). Their poetry has been frequently characterised through the focus on self-introspection and search for identity (Yeh 1992). Tang Xiaodu's 唐晓渡 essay "Nüxing shige: cong heiye dao baizhou" 女性诗歌:从黑夜到白昼 (Women's poetry: from the dark night into daytime) from the year 1987 exemplifies probably the very first attempt to define this new phenomenon. Written as a reaction to Zhai Yongming's literary debut "Nüren" 女人 (Women),¹¹ it sees the essence of "true" women's poetry as

(...)不仅意味着对被男性成见所长期遮蔽的别一世界的揭示，而且意味着已成的世界秩序被重新阐释和重新创造的可能。

(...) not only bringing into light the other world, hidden from view by male prejudices, but even more the possibility of the reinterpretation and creation of a completely new world order on different terms. (Tang 1987: 58-59)

Zhai's early lyrical creations strongly influenced and inspired a whole group of poets during

¹⁰ For a comprehensive introduction into and discussion of women's poetry in the PRC since the late 1980s, see: Huang 2002, 2003 and Zhang 2004.

¹¹ The cycle "Women" was written in 1984. Poems included in the series appeared in Sichuan's unofficial poetry journals and other journals outside the province in 1985. The series was officially published in book form (with other poems) in 1989. Six poems of this cycle of twenty were first published in the poetry journal *Shikan* in 1986 (Zhai 1996:13-16). The noteworthy essayistic foreword to this cycle titled "Heiye de yishi" (Black night consciousness) was written after the completion of her work on the lyrical part in 1985 and was first published officially in 1993 (Zhai 1995:70-72).

the late 1980s. Her literary gesture of writing women back into darkness represented the disillusionment with, and moreover, the deconstruction of, earlier representations of femininity. These images may be found not only in modern and Maoist iconography, but also in “misty poetry” (朦胧诗 *menglong shi*). This questioning of previous representations of the female experience was largely initiated by authors belonging to the so-called “third” or “newborn generation” (新生代 *xin shengdai*), of which Zhai is a member (Chang & Owen 2010: 664-665). Significantly, in a discussion on the topic of women’s poetry, published in the journal *Dangdai guoji shitan* (Contemporary International Poetry) in the year 2010, the poet Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (b. 1956) stated that Zhai Yongming’s poetical debut “Women” established post-Mao “feminism” (女性主义 *nüxing zhuyi*) as a legitimate genre (Zhai, Ouyang, et al. 2010: 101).

This statement is in tune with with Zhang Qinghua’s earlier claims (1999) that the female discourse of the 1980s was revived (还魂 *huanhun*) by a lyrical voice of women’s poetry. Furthermore, Zhang suggests the following:

(…), 我们对女性主义文学思潮的审视和讨论必须从女性诗歌开始，对于它的开创性的意义与价值必须给予确认。(Zhang 1999:42)

(…), we must first start our inquiry into, and discussion of, the feminist literary trend with women’s poetry. Its pioneering meaning and value must be acknowledged.

In addition, Zhang’s contribution delivers a substantial attempt to clarify the concepts involved in the discussions about entanglements between literature and feminist thought. He argues that the proper categorisation of poetic works by female poets who emerged on the literary horizon after 1984, should be “feminist poetry” (女性主义诗歌 *nüxingzhuyi shige*) instead of “feminine poetry” (女性诗歌 *nüxing shige*). In Zhang’s opinion these poets were the first to break with the perception of women’s emancipation as (only) being part of a humanist liberation of all mankind and of national salvation. That point of view was important for the May Fourth Movement and during the cultural fever of the early 1980s. According to Zhang (1999: 43), the preface to Zhai Yongming’s poetical debut, the essay “Heiye de yishi” 黑夜的意识 (Black night consciousness) should be regarded as the manifest of birth of contemporary, independent feminist literature (and especially poetry).

Zhai Yongming has been publishing self-reflective comments and essays since the 1980s. In 1989, she was one of the poets who participated in a discussion on women’s poetry published in the poetry journal *Shikan* (Poetry periodical). Although a significant shift in her views on women’s creativity and feminism can be observed since then, she has however repeatedly

pointed to contradictory expectations towards women authors voiced by professional and lay readers alike. Furthermore, she expressed her hope for a future re-adjustment of the position of women's poetry within the field of literary production:

我们期待这种时刻：“女性诗歌”不仅仅是凭着“女性”这个理由在文学史中占地，但也不仅仅因为“女性”这个理由就无法与男性诗人并驾齐驱，站在最杰出诗人之列。(Zhai 1989:11)

[W]e hope that one day “women's poetry” will enter the literary canon not only because of its “femininity”, but it should not be stripped of the possibility of taking an equal place in the first row and next to the male poets simply due to the fact of being “feminine”.

She has continuously raised her voice against attempts to define women's poetry as being valid only from the socio-political perspective as a document of a certain period in women's history. According to Zhai, this limited perspective deprived women poets of literary spaces of their own, and furthermore, it obscured the fact that their works established a novel poetic language. Being somewhat pessimistic about the imaginative landscapes of women's poetry in the late 1980s, Zhai currently (2005) praises poetical achievements of the younger generations, giving the examples of younger authors born in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Tang Danhong 唐丹鸿 (b. 1965), Lan Lan 蓝蓝 (b. 1967), Zhou Zan 周瓚 (b. 1968), Lü Yue 吕约 (b. 1972), Yin Lichuan 尹丽川 (b. 1973). One of them, Zhou Zan, occupies a special place on the contemporary Chinese poetry scene, not only due to the value of her own literary contributions, but also as a result of her theoretical work dedicated to women's poetry. She is the main editor of *Yi* (Wings),¹² an unofficial journal for women's poetry.

The last paper issue of the journal from the year 2002 re-visited the unconcluded discussion about a possible delineation and differentiation of the concepts of feminist and women's writing. In the foreword, the poet Tang Danhong questioned the applicability of labels such as “feminism” to poetical works. According to Tang, the poems are primarily private or “her own”, and any other categorisation would impose limitations on her artistic freedom. Zhou Zan countered Tang's statement in the afterword. In her opinion the discourse of sex and gender difference has remained significant and should not be abandoned while composing and discussing poetry. The same is valid for the theory and practice of feminism:

何为女性主义？它和诗歌有关吗？为什么它会影像我们中的一些人(无论男女)，在这个

¹² The first paper issue was published in 1999. An online edition started in 2002 can be currently found on <http://site.douban.com/206010/room/2670940/>. As in the case of different literary genres, the Internet has become an important arena for the development and circulation of women's poetry in the PRC, at the same time providing a virtual platform for theoretical discussions.

时代? “我们”的成长经验, “女性”的集体记忆, “她们”的历史, 是如何共同铸造了一个个女人的内在精神世界? 对此, 在这些诗歌中, 相信有心的读者一定会有所感受, 体察, 并有所发现。(Zhou 2002: 277)

What is feminism? Does it have any relation to poetry? Why does it influence some among us (regardless of their sex), why now? “Our” experience of maturing, the collective memory of “women”, “their” history; how did all this together establish the inner spiritual world of every single woman? In regard to these [questions], [I] believe that an attentive reader will certainly gather some experiences and furthermore make some discoveries within these poems.

Feminist imagination and *écriture féminine*

The concept of *écriture féminine* cannot be omitted in the discussion of the gendered (female) body as a site of emancipation and self-empowerment. This distinct “feminine script” is furthermore associated with the topic of women’s creativity and literary imagination.

The concept of *écriture féminine* may be traced back to Hélène Cixous literary manifesto “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975, English translation 1976), together with a book she co-authored the same year, *The Newly Born Woman* (Cixous & Clément 1975, English translation 1986). In the first part of this book, her co-author Catherine Clément introduces the figure of the “girl” who successfully escapes from being the spectacle looked upon by the patriarchal masters and eventually “flies away” (Ibid.: 56-57). The second part of *The Newly Born Woman*, entitled “Sorties”, is an extended version of “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in which Cixous meditates on ways for a woman to get “out and out” of the dualistic hierarchical phallo-logocentric symbolic systems. In tune with Clément, she too eventually turns to the metaphor of flying / flight.

The authors’ rebellion is not solely against the exclusion of women from the symbolic order. It originates concurrently from a denial of colonial space. As a consequence, it aims at a critique of all manifestations of violent dialectics of otherness, which expel what is “strange” and often enslave it at the position of the inferior “other”. This is a dialectic inherent to racism, imperialism, and capitalism:

I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French), superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become “invisible,” like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right “color.” Women. Invisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools – dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded, etc. Thanks to some annihilating dialectical magic. (Ibid.: 70)

Clearly, *écriture féminine* is not only a textual, but also a political strategy, aimed at revealing an exclusionary dynamic inherent to a social reality based on dual hierarchical oppositions.

Cixous identifies writing and imagination as sites of rebellion that remain accessible for those determined to be inappropriate by the “masters” of the binary matrix.

Analogous trains of thought may be found in Gloria Anzaldúa’s “mestizaje *écriture*” (Keating 1996: 122). Anzaldúa emphasised her own bodily experience as inscribed by queerness, physical ailments and ethnic otherness, which were crucial inspirations for her writing and her identity project. The significance of the body for her literary imaginings may be inferred from the following quote:

For silence to transform into speech, sound and words, it must first traverse through our female bodies. (Anzaldúa 1990: xxii)

In contrast to Cixous’ ecstatic femininity, the female body Anzaldúa speaks of is tormented by psychical and physical pain. As a consequence, speaking of the body empowers her to transgress her own psychosomatic vulnerability. Significantly, the mere materiality of the bodies in her work is never separated from their social embeddedness. Aside from being personal, her “body writing” frequently addresses various forms of social discrimination. She thematises the cultural, ethnic and economic alienation suffered by herself and by others who happen to be negatively marked by gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality. As a direct result Anzaldúa’s *écriture* escapes the trap of essential femininity, falling for which is an error Cixous has been accused of.¹³

The risks inherent to thematising the body as distinct female text have been important points of revision and self-reflection for numerous feminist thinkers. The interview which Ellen Rooney conducted with Gayatri Spivak grants an overall insight into the debate over essentialism¹⁴ (Spivak 1993: 1-27). Rooney summarises the controversies in the discussions around the body as follows:

The body is of course essentialism’s great text: to read in its form the essence of Woman is certainly one of phallocentrism’s strategies; to insist that the body too is materially woven into social (con)texts is anti-essentialism’s reply. But feminism’s persistent return to the body is only in part a rejoinder to the resilience of anti-feminist’s essentialism. (...) Feminisms return to the problem of essentialism – despite their shared distaste for the mystification of Woman – because it remains difficult to engage in feminist analysis and politics if not “as a woman”. (Spivak 1993:2)

Her interlocutor referred to the concept of *écriture féminine* in two earlier essays (Spivak

¹³ For an overall introduction into the critique of *écriture féminine* see Jones 1981, Felski 1989:19-51.

¹⁴ “Essentialism” here refers to the notion that individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable “essence” – a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature (Moya & Hames-García 2000: 7, fn. 8).

1993: 158-193; Spivak 1998: 184-212). After she had clarified numerous areas of critique, Spivak finally acquiesces to what, in her opinion, is the prominent gain from thematising the body in feminism:

For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at; here is a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan and a theme the old washerwomen by the river would understand. (Spivak 1998:211)

Trinh T. Minh-ha is another author who is acutely aware of the troublesome nature of the body as a feminist text. She opens her *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) with an inquiry into the questions of women's creativity and identity. She then discusses the "triple bind" of the at times conflicted identities of gender, race and creative occupation that the woman writer of colour often finds herself caught in. Trinh focuses on language (defined as a vehicle of circulation of established power relations, i.e. the master's language), which the writing woman is attempting to make her own. Trinh rejects the metaphor of "stealing" the other's language, which was previously introduced by Cixous. According to her, women's language must first be found, or even perhaps first actively discovered in writing:

Finding a voice, searching for words and sentences: say some thing, one thing, or no thing; tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical habits of your writing and decide for yourself whether they free or repress. Again, order(s). Shake syntax, smash the myths, and if you lose, slide on, unearth some new linguistic paths. Do you surprise? Do you shock? Do you have a choice? (Trinh 1989: 20)

In step with Cixous and others, Trinh focuses on the significance of the body for women's writing. According to Trinh, *écriture féminine* is a nonexclusive mode of writing and, what is more, an in-between space. One allowing the existence of mastery without power or violence and as a consequence, admitting a re-negotiation of fixed meanings:

"Writing the body" is that abstract-concrete, personal-political realm of excess (...). It is a way of making theory in gender, of making of theory a politics of everyday life, thereby rewriting the ethnic female subject as site of differences. (Trinh 1989: 44)

Theoretical discussions that arose around the notion of women's writing and a growing irritation over the alleged essentialism inherent to *écriture féminine* led Trinh to resume the discourse on this topic (1991: 119-147). In her opinion, the body in arts is written against the separation of art and life, and furthermore, in a refusal of a dualistic-oriented (Western) philosophy. It is ceaseless in its unsettling movement of "undoing, doing and redoing":

Women's writing thus frees itself from the desire for authenticity; it inscribes the body of the subject (and reciprocally) without being assimilated to it. It is itself body. Difference is thus conceived of not as a divisive element, but as a source of interactions; object and subject are neither in opposition nor merged with each other. (Trinh 1991: 136)

Trinh conveys the "I" not as a "unified subject", but as "infinite layers" (1989: 94). Consequently, she rejects the notions of authenticity and identity:

The real, nothing else than a code of representation, does not (cannot) coincide with the lived or the performed. (Ibid.: 94)

Therefore, Trinh argues against the notion of "female identity" as a key to understanding value writings by women. According to Trinh, a woman can never be defined, nor can the practice of feminine writing. In consequence, feminism must not be built upon the notion of any fixed identity.

This radical dissemination of identity has eventually led to an impasse and an intellectual counter-movement of "reclaiming identity" (Moya & Hermes-García 2000). Ways out of the insurmountable, paralysing theoretical divide have been sought, for example by Spivak, who pragmatically proposed "strategical essentialism" (1987: 205) to enable political action independent of theoretical gulfs. Judith Butler spoke of "women" as necessary, but "contingent" foundations of feminism and furthermore needing to be subject to scrutiny for their exclusionary potential (Butler 1992: 14). Finally, Mieke Bal has pointed to the current necessity of recognising the historicity of the language of feminism and, in consequence, the indispensability of its constant actualisation and re-invention. In a similar tone, with regards to women's artistic creativity, Bal acknowledges:

It would be doing [all women] an injustice, to posit their work as an object that is ontologically different. Nor can her subjective ontological femaleness be either ignored or simply brought to bear on her work. It is only in the interstices of history in which women live different lives from men – not because they are different but because they are confined in difference – that, momentarily, the sex and gender of an artist matters. (Bal 2006: 230)

From women's writing to body writing

In the critical evaluation of women's writing, an inclination to consider its distinctiveness as writing produced by women and thus caught up in a form of biological determinism and essentialism makes itself frequently visible. As a consequence, women's writing has often

been associated with the “body writing” (身体写作 *shenti xiezu*) phenomenon. The body writing as a discourse, which has established itself in the PRC since the late 1990s, will be introduced in detail in a separate chapter. At this point, it is important to highlight that the body turn in literature divided the critical voices into two major, informal and opposing “camps”. One of them (represented by Xu Kun, Dai Jinhua, Chen Xiaoming 陈晓明, Nan Fan 南帆, et al.) regards the emphasis on sexual difference in women’s writing as opening a critical space; a conceptual, representational, and erotic space in which women can address themselves as, and to, women. While remaining aware of the impossibility of escaping the aporetic nature of the body, which stays forever haunted by the spectre of essentialism (Spivak 1993: 2), these academics foregrounded the move away from “no-body” literature through an “un-silencing” of the body (Xu 1999: 62). This enabled the emergence of a female subject, capable of speaking in her own voice. The “opposing” camp (Ge Hongbing 葛红兵, Xie Youshun 谢有顺, et al.) discusses the notion of body writing as part of a critique of postmodernist aesthetics. Quintessential examples of body writing, according to Ge and Xie, are delivered primarily by authors belonging to younger generations (born in the 1970s or later), who are furthermore often associated with the so-called “Beauty Writers” (美女作家 *meinü zuojia*) and the “Lower Body” (下半身 *xiabanshen*) poets.

In addition, waves of critique of the body turn in moral terms have risen repeatedly since the 1990s. As a consequence, some women’s texts were stigmatised as soft pornography. These accusations aimed at prominent elder writers, i.e. Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958) and Chen Ran 陈染 (b. 1962), in addition to some belonging to the younger generation, like Wei Hui 卫慧 (b. 1973) and Yin Lichuan.

Gender and representation in the uneasy *post*-chronotopes

Gender and representation

The shift of focus from a certain “somatophobia” to the materiality and textuality of the body that took place in mainland China’s literature of the 1980s, destabilised the then available representations of gender. It furthermore enabled a renegotiation of control over them by subjects who had been excluded from access to representational practices. These processes were linked to a radical rethinking of the former constructions of individual and collective identities. A questioning of the cultural representation of women, which may be found in earlier literary and visual texts, is inherent to this process. The importance of literary texts in

the struggle with signifying practices was for example highlighted by Gayatri Spivak's in her warning that "[t]he role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored (Spivak 1985: 243)."

The claim that gender, one of the most crucial concepts in feminist reflection, provides a "useful" category of analysis in the humanities and social sciences, was first elaborated at length by the historian Joan Scott (1988). She argues that gender is a culturally constructed output of contemporary social relations between men and women, operating at four levels: those of cultural symbols, standards and values, institutions and, finally, individual identity. These levels both correspond to and transgress the traditional sex or gender system. Scott understands gender as another framework, with the help of which power relations within different fields; politics, religion, and art, can be grasped and defined. Thus, gender is more than just a knowledge-constitutive category in the analysis of power relations between the binary of biological sexes. It can furthermore be implemented anywhere that connections and relationships with attributes of masculinity and femininity are referred to, even metaphorically.

Thomas Laquer claims in his foreword to *Chinese Femininities / Chinese Masculinities*, that all contributions to the reader agree with Scott's argument in foregrounding the concept that "(...) no political or economic or social history is possible without a cultural history: a history of the meaning of things, actions, events, movements, gestures, clothes, and accomplishments, among much else. And it argues moreover, that there can be no cultural history without a history of gender" (Laquer 2000: xiii). Furthermore, in 2008 feminist scholars Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng pointed to the meaning of Joan Scott's work for China historians and defined it as a "working guide on how to bushwalk and read partially obscured tracks" (Hershatter & Zhang 2008: 1404).

According to Teresa de Lauretis (1984), we can assume that the varied images and representations of women¹⁵ are essential to the negotiations of and within women's "subjectivity". Significantly, de Lauretis points to a certain "violence of rhetoric" (1985) inherent to these processes. In her later work *Technologies of Gender* (1987) she equates gender with representation. According to her this equivalency does however not mean that

¹⁵ The investigation into images and representations of femininity remains a significant field within feminist theory. Early contributions, i.e. by Laura Mulvey (1975) and Griselda Pollock (1987), focused mainly on visual representations. They constitute an important point of reference for later elaborations on representations in language and their relation to construction of subjectivity, capitalist production and consumption, etc. (Humm 1995: 238-239).

“(...) it does not have concrete or real implications, both social and subjective, for the material life of individuals” (de Lauretis 1987: 3). Furthermore, de Lauretis identifies the representation of gender with its construction by the state apparatus, academia, intellectuals and artistic practices, as well as in feminism. She points to an important paradox inherent to the concept of gender:

(...) the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction; that is to say, by any discourse, feminist or otherwise, that would discard it as ideological misrepresentation. For gender, like the real, is not only the effect of representation but also its excess, what remains outside the discourse as a potential trauma which can rupture or destabilize, if not contain, any representation. (de Lauretis, *Ibid.*).

A similar opinion is expressed in Meng and Dai’s groundbreaking study (1989) dedicated to female images in the Republican and Mao periods. In this publication they argue that representations of the female body were both attached to, and objects of, very different discourses. Moreover, in regard to the possible forming of collective identities, Meng and Dai claim that women as a group were never allowed to emerge on their terms, because the predominant modern nationalist and socialist discourses re-inscribed images of women into male-dominated (or phallogentric) representational models. Consequently, the “woman” was commonly represented as a victim, so that the claims to power of the political, ideological or cultural climber appeared legitimate due to her alleged liberation. Later, however, the rescued and simultaneously emancipated “new woman” was presented by her saviours as strikingly similar to the previous traditional representation, and moreover, confined within her symbolic role as a bearer of hope and a heroine of the new era. These representations of the liberated women were nothing more than elusive. As a consequence, the newly constructed femininity remained allegorical and repetitive. It was often fettered to contradictory regimes of the feudal past and modern presence, and as such not powerful enough to jeopardise the traditional patriarchal world order. The “woman” equalled at this time a distillate of cultural discourses and a socially constructed projection surface, neither representing nor being represented, but rather “embodying” the representation itself.

These examples show that representations may be questioned as displaying a nexus between aesthetics and politics. In their most obvious aesthetic dimensions, visual or textual representations are supposed to stand for, mirror or mimetically reflect phenomena which can be found in the “real” world. In terms of the political, to represent means to be entrusted with the right and power to speak for a segment of the population. Representation is consequently inextricably linked to the notions of “looking at” and “speaking for” others. Neither in its

aesthetic nor in its political dimension is the act of representing ethically unproblematic.¹⁶ Judith Butler's critique of feminism as politics of representation sums up the main controversies inherent to it:

On the one hand, representation serves as an operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy of women as political subject; on the other hand representation is the normative function of a language, which is said either to reveal or to distort what assumed to be true about the category of women (Butler 1999: 3-4).

The renegotiation of the meaning of feminism in the PRC, which started in the 1980s, may be regarded as a result of a representational impasse (in terms of Butler's critique) reached by official bodies, such as the All China's Women Federation (ACWF).

From the postcolonial perspective

The emergence, and growing influence, of the postcolonial perspective has led to critique, renegotiations and finally a growing awareness of the cultural bias within the fields of Western (universal) women and gender studies. Aside from the disillusionment and the eventual bankruptcy of the ideal of a "global sisterhood", it has stimulated a growing interest in the investigation of multiple intersectional discriminations, originating in race, ethnicity, class and gender. For example, Chandra Mohanty in her early constitutive essay "Under Western Eyes" (1984) categorically opposed the definitional power exerted by Western feminism and the production of a unified Third World women's image in which the West was projected as the only yardstick and standard enlightening force for "the other women's movements". It was her intervention, among others, that led to the acknowledgement of the existence of "feminisms of other women" in the mainstream academic enterprise. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement cannot be regarded as an unproblematic inclusion of the voice of the other. The vicissitudes of this process have been thematised at length:

The apparent receptiveness of our curricula to the Third World, a receptiveness which makes full use of non-Western human specimen as instruments for articulation, is something we have to practice and deconstruct at once. (Chow 1992: 112);

The privileged Third World informant crosses cultures within the network made possible by socialized capital, or from the point of view of the indigenous intellectual or professional elite in actual Third World countries. Among the latter, the desire 'to cross' cultures means accession, left or right, feminist or masculinist, into the elite culture of the metropolis. This is done by the commodification of the particular 'Third World culture' to which they belong.

¹⁶ For further discussion see Spivak 1988, Butler 1999: 3-10, Chow 2001: 40-42.

(Spivak 1989: 221)

Doubts over the existence of a single, universal feminist theory and practice were pushed even further by Spivak, who provocatively questioned: “[...] why globalize? Why should a sociological study that makes astute generalizations about sex or affective production in the United States feel obliged to produce a ‘cross-cultural constant’?” (2006: 348).

Consequently, the politics of representation occupy a central position in postcolonial discourse. Since Spivak’s investigation into whether the subaltern (the silenced representative of postcolonial patriarchal societies) could speak (Spivak 1988), the interest of postcolonial studies in the topic of representation has remained invariably focused on the aforementioned nexus between aesthetics and politics. The investigation into the double meaning of term representation (*Vertreten / Darstellen*¹⁷) has led to the following claim:

(...) if representation creates realities, discourses, images, fields of knowledge, and political contestation, then it never occurs accidentally or is inconsequential, but embedded in history, power relations, and current politics. (Hoffman & Peeren 2010: 14)

Spivak (1988) demonstrated already that “speaking for others” inevitably entails connotations of class, in addition to gender and race. Furthermore, her reading of a Hindu woman’s suicide points to the important question of the (non)existence of unproblematic self-representation. In the light of these remarks, Ouyang Jianghe approval of the representative role of women poets, requires further questioning:

由于那是长时间没有女性声音之后的突然开始，就出现了一种类似“井喷式”的东西，女诗人(…)当了一群没有声音的女性的代言人(…)

Due to the lengthy lack of feminine voice, the sudden emergence of [women’s poetry] resembled an explosion, women poets (...) acted as the voiceless women’s representative speakers (...). (Zhai, Ouyang, et al. 2010: 101)

Subsequently, these “representative speakers” female writers and academics were accused of class-blindness by critics, who attacked the post-Mao feminism for being an elitist, academic project stripped of any emancipatory political meaning.

It is important, that the implementation of the notion of postcoloniality within the field of Chinese Studies is regarded problematic. For example, according to Shu-mei Shih it is questionable whether the Chinese “postsocialism” is indeed postcolonial:

There is no post-Cold War condition without postsocialism, and vice versa; hence

¹⁷ Spivak 1988.

postsocialism is, simply, a contemporary historical condition that affects all and that demands us to hold a non-unitary perspective on the world, even as this perspective ruffles all of our preconceived notions of postcoloniality. The relationship between postcoloniality and postsocialism needs much greater unpacking. (Shih 2012:29)

In her conscientious examination of the predicaments of the postcolonial condition, Shih reminisces about Dai's earlier reluctance to declare the Cold War over:

然而，某種針對中國的冷戰式的對峙及其意識形態表述，仍不斷出現在與中國相關的國際事物——對我來說，尤其是呈現在關於中國的社會，文化的理解定式和闡釋策略——之中。作為一種國際政治現實，這種冷戰式的對峙與意識形態表述，固然是由於中國作為蘇聯，東歐劇變之後的最後一個社會主義大國，但更多是作為全球化過程中新的權利 / 利益需要所採取的修辭方式。(Dai 2006: 14)

A certain representation of the Cold War conflict and its ideology is however present whenever reference to China is made in international affairs. In my opinion, [this takes place] especially as a means of understanding the tactics of the PRC and furthermore as a means explaining the peculiarities of Chinese society and culture from a Western perspective. It is a matter of fact in international politics that this kind of Cold War-style confrontational and ideological statements doubtlessly results from China's position as the last socialist state following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It is however much aligned to the rhetoric applied in the expression of new power and profit orientation necessitated in the ongoing process of globalisation.

Apart from being critical of the West and its ceaseless "othering" of (post)socialist China, Dai considers her own, and other theoretical proposals positioned in (Eastern) Asia, as important for a re-opening of global dialogue and as a way of heading off the current Cold War-related impasse in theorising the contemporary:

而亞洲的歷史：殖民主義與後殖民的歷史，及其亞洲所蘊含的思想資源，無疑是重新打開全球性的批判理論的思想“瓶頸”的潛在可能之一，也是重新開敞女性主義的理論與實踐的可能性之一。(Dai 2006:26)

The history of Asia: the history of colonialism and postcolonialism; as well as Asia's intellectual resources, without doubt deliver latent possibilities to overcome the bottleneck of critical global thought. They also provide one of the possibilities for the re-opening and broadening of feminist theory and practice.

In summary it may be said that the aforementioned, uneasy encounter between Western and Chinese feminist scholars and activists exemplifies the many difficulties inherent to any attempts to bridge geographic, linguistic and cultural borders. Moreover, there is a prevalence of power struggles and opposing stances within the field. These are not strictly delineated according to the West – East division, but pertain as well to the negotiations of emancipatory

projects between members of different branches of Third World, diasporic, academic, queer and straight feminisms:

Chahandra Mohanty has recently argued, for instance, for the primacy of the identity of 'worker' for the Third World women (...) [O]ne can imagine an extremely productive dialogue between someone like Li Xiaojiang, who is situated in a postsocialist society, and Mohanty, who wishes to take a postcapitalist position in which the pros and cons of the primacy of the worker identity for Third World women can be debated. In such an exchange, we would have to more dramatically confront the fault lines of Western-centric and post-capitalologic postcolonial and diasporic theorizing in the United States. (Shih 2002:102)

From the standpoint of postcolonial studies the fact that the theoretical foundations of contemporary feminism in China have developed under different social circumstances than those found in the West should not be ignored. The so-called "Western" feminism, as received and addressed in the 1980s in China, was primarily a textual concept. As such it resembled a retold imaginative frame, which in different contexts could be filled with various contents and meanings. Feminist academics such as Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua drafted the conceptual framework of contemporary Chinese women and gender studies in the course of their often highly critical engagement with Marxist and Maoist legacies, together with Western feminism. Without the acknowledgment of this fact, the question: "What do Chinese female authors mean, when they claim not to be a feminist?" cannot be investigated.

Postmodern twist

Many critics discussed the body writing phenomenon as an example of postmodern, and as such doubtlessly Western-inspired, type of writing.¹⁸ It is easy to point to the distinct moment in recent Chinese intellectual history in which postmodernism arrived in the PRC, literally in the person of Fredric Jameson, who gave a series of lectures on this topic at Peking University in 1985. It may however be assumed that, much like the case of feminist theory, postmodern approaches to culture have been retold and translated in China since the 1980s. An overview of stances in the discussion around the (im)possibility of placing China within the theoretical

¹⁸ Postmodernism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a new influential and transdisciplinary movement in the social sciences and humanities. The complexities of postmodern phenomena have been thematised through their three basic relations to modernity: that of temporality (being after), causality (because of) and transgression (reaching beyond). These aspects were explored in relation to their ambiguous (dis)continuity with the modern. This relationship may be described as a concomitant critique of, and complicity with, modernist aesthetics. Postmodern perception does not acknowledge established standards of universal truth and criticized many assumptions of Western philosophy. Among these assumptions are those concerning the structures of western social and political economy, the concept of historical "progress", and the weakening of a unitary, universal subject. Simultaneously and beyond intellectual enterprise, postmodernism, with its fondness for pastiche, playfulness, hybridity, and its scandalous affairs with popular culture, challenges classical Western aesthetics. See: Lyotard 1984, Jameson 1991.

framework of postmodernity may be found in the special edition of the journal *Boundary 2* (1997). Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong defined the postmodern condition in the PRC as follows:

What we need to keep in mind, especially with reference to the PRC, is that postmodernity is not just what comes after the modern but rather what comes after particular manifestations of the modern in China's historical circumstances, that the postmodern is also the postrevolutionary and the postsocialist. (Dirlik & Zhang 1997: 4)

The notion of postmodernism has been an inspiration for feminist philosophy since the 1980s.¹⁹ For example, a strong focus on the body within feminist theory emerged in dialogue with the notion of postmodern subjectivity and as a critique of the previously dominating Cartesian model of the subject.²⁰ The discussed emergence of the “voices of the other women” is associated with the postmodern celebration of multiplicity and difference, which results from its “rejection of the claim of exclusivity” (Appiah 1991: 342). Nevertheless, the evaluation of the “Third World women's” surfacing on the feminist horizon has remained highly ambiguous. Donna Haraway suggested that the name “woman of colour” constructs a new postmodern identity “out of difference, otherness and specificity” (1991: 14) which helps to “dissolve Western selves” and is, consequently, fully “political” (Ibid.: 16). Gloria Anzaldúa claimed that “[W]e writers of colour (...) are the quintessential example of the postmodern condition” (2009:193), while her concept of *mestiza* has been celebrated as an “(...) expression of the postmodern plural, fluid, non-fixed and nonessential identity” (Barcinski 2005: 103). At the same time however, postmodernism was intensely criticised by feminist philosophers, primarily for its hasty dissolving of the notion of the subject, which leads to an impasse with regards to possible conceptualisations and implementations of empowering identity politics (Hartsock 1990: 164, Shih 2007: 20-21).

These examples show clearly that even though the relationship between feminism and postmodernism has already been theoretically questioned for more than a decade, the main controversy about the possibilities of postmodern feminist politics has remained intact. Generally speaking, the discursive exchange between feminism and postmodernism has been complicated by the fact that they are both categories of the present, which aim at criticizing the past and projecting a future. Furthermore, there is no far-reaching compromise as to what these two designates refer to. Depending on the definitions, feminism and postmodernism may be subsequently regarded as speaking in unison, or contrarily, asking for a choice:

¹⁹ See for example: Flax 1987, 1990, Hutcheon 1988, 1989, Braidotti 1991, Benhabib, et.al. 1995.

²⁰ Compare: Chanter in: Jaggar & Young 2000: 263-271.

feminism or postmodernism?

In the critique of the Chinese body writing phenomenon, the notions of feminism and postmodernism are important references for their critics. In Ge Hongbing and Xie Youshun's understanding of the postmodern condition, it is discussed as a result of the transformation of social conditions. They claim that postmodernity stands for the dead end of the humanist's subject. Ge and Xie linger in their adherence to their anti-postmodernist and anti-feminist viewpoints. Concomitantly, feminist critics Xu Kun and Dai Jinhua, have not yet included or have only occasionally referred to the concept of postmodernism in their intellectual projects. It seems that the prior feminist (*nüquanzhuyi*) engagement with Marxism-cum-Maoism which ended in an "unhappy marriage",²¹ led to the emergence of sceptical stances towards novel theoretical alliances, or misalliances.

Aims and methodological embeddedness

Concisely stated, this dissertation investigates the cultural phenomenon of body writing as attributed to several, mainly female, authors by a lay and professional reading public. However, it also positions the body turn in literature within a broader sociological context of changing cultural and natural environments. The strong focus on the proper understanding of concepts discussed in the text, such as "feminism", "body writing" etc., is inspired by Mieke Bal's notion of "travelling concepts in the humanities" (2002). Bal highlights in her works the question of traces and trajectories of travelling concepts beyond the limits and borders of traditional academic disciplines: philosophy, literary studies and social sciences. Her methodological reflections are relevant for the discussion of the alleged genre of Chinese body writing, as the evaluation of this cultural phenomenon cannot be entirely confined to one traditional academic discipline such as literary studies or sociology. Consequently, the field in which the analysis takes place is constructed in the course of a ceaseless questioning of disciplinary boundaries. In Bal's own words:

The field of cultural analysis is not delimited, because the traditional delimitations must be suspended; by selecting an object, you question a field. Nor are its methods sitting in a toolbox waiting to be applied; they, too, are part of the exploration. You don't apply a method, you conduct a meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field. This is where travel becomes the unstable ground

²¹ Sargent 1981.

for cultural analysis. (Bal 2002: 4)

This thesis is guided by a “concept-based methodology” (Ibid.: 5), rather than by a single theory. In accordance with Bal’s definition of cultural analysis (Ibid.: 44-45), it approaches concepts of body writing, feminism, corporeality, women’s literature through a close reading of distinct objects of analysis, or, in this case, literary texts. It aims at a better understanding of these selected objects on their own terms. In addition, the main concepts discussed in the study are to be “unpacked” to clarify “(...) the ramifications, traditions and histories, conflated in their current usage (...)” (Ibid.: 29).

Rather than aiming at a comprehensive overview of the entire field of “women’s writing”, this study focuses on a limited corpus of texts by authors belonging to different generations²² : the newborn generation,²³ the so-called Generation X or “new new humankind” (新新人类 *xin xin renlei*),²⁴ and finally, the late-born generation (晚生代 *wan shengdai*)²⁵. The selection of authors and texts is therefore in accordance with the general intention to discuss works that may be considered crucial for the identification of the changing “protocols” (Barlow 1994: 261) of femininity and gendered corporeality in contemporary China. Consequently, the primary interests while rereading and revisiting contemporary literary landscapes lie mainly on moments of change or rupture. Thus, the works to be discussed have been deliberately chosen with the aim of challenging previous critical readings of these texts.

Structure

The second chapter of the thesis, which follows after the introductory part, delivers an overview of the theoretical discussion of the body turn in contemporary Chinese literature that has been taking place since the 1980s. This part aims at introducing the key researchers and

²² On the notion of generational differences in Chinese literature, see Link 2000: 122-129. Link names the periods in which writers were educated as the most useful basis for comparing their works. He differentiates between four distinct educational experiences: “[...] before 1949, the seventeen years of Maoist socialism 1949-1966, the Cultural Revolution years of 1966-1976; and the years of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms that began in the 1970s” (Link 2000: 122).

²³ Also translated as “newly born generation”, in general this term points to Chinese authors born in the 1960s, who came of age at the twilight of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). These terms primarily refer to the generation of poets that rose to prominence in the second half of the 1980s, but are used also in reference to narrative writings.

²⁴ Usually referring to those born in the late 1970s and later, see: Shi 2003: 130, Kong 2005: 110, Wang 2005:15, Lu 2007: 53.

²⁵ The youngest cohort of authors, born in the 1980s. It is important to notice that all of the generation-based categorisations mentioned above are not sharply delineated and can sometimes be misleading. In regard to the newest Chinese literature, the notion of “generation” remains a fuzzy concept.

crucial concepts involved in the debate over the significance of the notion of corporeality within the literary field.

The third chapter discusses the first distinct moment of change in the poetics of literary texts by female authors. It emerged concomitantly with the coming of age for several women poets at the twilight of the Cultural Revolution. They were the first to break with conventional literary representations of (gendered and classed) corporeality, which had remained cemented in prerevolutionary sediments and mingled with later revolutionary aesthetics (Zheng 2004, Zan 2007, Lingelfelter in Lupke 2007: 105-123). The emphasis these poets put on sexual difference opened new creative possibilities. Not only assuming novel and gendered subject positionalities, but moreover speaking from these positions, women were consequently recognised by other women as the subjects, and sometimes as objects of female desire.

The discussion of women's poetry focuses on the texts of Zhai Yongming, which serve to date as the quintessential example of post-Maoist women's poetry. While Zhai is not directly associated with the body writing phenomenon, her early lyrical creations were read as examples of a distinct and innovative body poetics. The close reading of selected poems by Zhai Yongming aims at showing how, in her writings, the gendered body is put into the scene. Furthermore, the transformation of Zhai's poetical language and imagery is discussed in order to argue against the alleged disappearance of the body poetics from her later works. Even if the poetic means by which the body starts to matter in her current writings differ from those typical for the late 1980s, the body continues to matter in her later works.

The fourth chapter recalls the second significant moment for the emergent discourse of corporeal literature that is signalled by the surfacing of the so-called "Beauty Writers" in 1998. That year, the literary magazine *Zuojia* (Writers) introduced them to the public, bringing together eight female authors: Wei Hui, Mian Mian 棉棉 (b. 1970), Zhou Jieru 周洁茹 (b. 1976), Zhu Wenying 朱文颖 (b. 1970), Jin Renshun 金仁顺 (b. 1970), Dai Lai 戴来 (b. 1972), Wei Wei 魏微 (b. 1970), and Zhao Bo 赵波 (b. 1971). Two of them would subsequently become globally recognised literary celebrities: Wei Hui for her book *Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝 (Shanghai Baby, 1998), and Mian Mian for *Tang* 糖 (Candy, 2000). For the majority of her readership, Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby* is the defining example of the body writing phenomenon (Berg 2010). Furthermore, Wei's deliberate public performing of the role of a female author challenged not only the recognised protocols of femininity, but also the discursive positions of female writers. She pushed the limits of socially acceptable forms of femininity, simultaneously exposing both the gender and ethnically driven dynamics of the global publishing market.

Apart from the works of the Beauty Writers, critics Xie (2001), Ge and Song (2005) associate the postmodern body writing with the so-called Lower Body poetry. Significantly, and in contrast to the critical evaluation of works by the Beauty Writers, the label of body writing has in this case been applied to refer to a distinct poetics, along with its associated, manifested life philosophy, and not simply as a reaction to the biological sex of the author. Works by the Lower Body poets, like those of the Beauty Writers, are associated with the urban environment of big cities such as Shanghai or Beijing. An important difference must nevertheless be mentioned in any juxtaposition of the Lower Body with the Beauty Writers: the self-fashioning of the poets has remained of no interest to the global publishing market (van Crevel 2008).

Sheng Keyi's 盛可以 novel *Bei Mei* 北妹 (Northern girls, 2004)²⁶ was also associated with the body writing of the Beauty Writers. In contrast to Wei's protagonists, who represent young urban professionals, Sheng focuses on the lives of female migrant workers. Her novel subverts current official writings on the topic of displaced women in a thought-provoking way. Instead of adhering to standard, sentimental victimisation, the main protagonist of the novel gives us a strong sense of agency, originating from her reliance on her bodily capital.

Poetry written by the female migrant worker Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 (b. 1980) is discussed in the last chapter of the thesis. Zheng's corporeal poetics of pain contributes to a literary vision of a decentred subjectivity and corporeality between the making and unmaking of physical suffering. The plain, laconic language of her poetry, in which she refers to two landscapes familiar to her – that of a rural origin and that of an industrial everyday – raises questions about those parts of the lives of migrant workers that are hidden from view behind the factory and dormitory walls. Migrant workers' literary "cries of pain" are associated by some critics with the body writing phenomenon.

²⁶ In 2011 Sheng Keyi's novel was translated into English as *Northern Girls. Life Goes On*. An alternative rendition of the title, *Girls From the North*, was originally proposed by the Chinese publishing house; this translation appears on the book cover of the Chinese publication.

Chapter 2

Body Matters

Mapping the body in “sinophone” theory

Since the late 1980s “the body” as a critical analytical concept has gradually gained importance in mainland China. This turn to the body in academic texts coincided with the increasing visibility of a cohort of female poets and writers who attempted to gain power over the language and representations of the previously repressed or thoroughly displaced female body experience. This may, in other words, be seen as a turn away from the overdetermined, state-run feminism of equality and towards the site of feminism of difference. Many of these authors, such as Xu Kun, remained concomitantly active in the academic field of women’s studies.

Consequently, in the academic field of women’s and contemporary literary studies, this fictional writing was originally theorised by women, mainly in terms of “privatised / personalised writing”. Xu Kun (1999: 62) proposed the term “body narration” to refer to the unique landscape of Mainland Chinese female writing of the 1990s.

In the middle of the 1990s the interest in representations of corporeality in literature reached beyond the confines of feminist scholarship. This aesthetic body turn was addressed by Chinese literary theorists in terms of “corporeal rhetoric” (身体修辞学 *shenti xiucixue*, Nan 1996), “literary somatics” (文学身体学 *wenxue shenti xue*, Xie 2001, 2004, 2009), “body writing” (身体写作 *shenti xiezu*, Ge & Song 2005: 93-110) or on the extreme end of the critical continuum as “flesh-ism” (肉体主义 *routi zhuyi*, Xie 2004). Although there is a prevailing lack of consensus as to the exact phenomena referred to by these ambiguous terms, they all seem to point to an aesthetic of excess: whether excesses in opposition to current literary and linguistic conventions, rules of good taste, accepted feminist stances or moral taboos. A small number of critics are however of the opinion that this escape from the confines of traditional and revolutionary somatophobic Chinese culture resulted in the emergence of the body as the main creative drive behind the Chinese literary scene of the late 1990s (Nan 1996, Xu 1999, Xie 2003, Ge 2005).

The *shenti xiezu* (body writing) phenomenon

Ge Hongbing 葛红兵 (b. 1968) is considered the first to have coined the term “body writing” (*shenti xiezu*) and to bring it into circulation.²⁷ He developed this concept together with Song Geng 宋耕 (b. 1973) in their joint publication *Shenti Zhengzhi* 身体政治 (Body politics, 2005). In this book they trace the genealogy of the somatophobic features of Chinese literature in canonical texts and find their origins in Mencius’ philosophy (Mengzi 孟子, c. 372-289 B.C.). Ge’s interest in the body turn in Mainland Chinese literature may however be identified already in his earlier article, published in the year 1997, entitled “Getixing wenxue yu shentixing zuojia – 90 niandai de xiaoshuo zhuanxiang” 个体性文学与身体型作家——90年代的小说转向 (Individualistic literature and the body-model writers – transformation of the novel in the 1990s), in which he argues for the emergence of a new aesthetic formation in post-Mao China, namely one indebted to a new concept of a privatised, irrational, desiring and incarnated subject.

According to Ge, the re-introduction of a subjective and body-oriented narrating voice, which is closely related to “individualistic aesthetics” (个体性美学 *getixing meixue*), has only recently put an end to the reign of the once prevalent “collective aesthetics” (群体性美学 *quntixing meixue*) in literature. Ge defines a group of “wandering writers” (走着 *zouzhe*), by whom he means floating intellectuals who are no longer bound to a state-owned work unit (单位 *danwei*). Furthermore, these writers focus in their works on the “self” (我 *wo*) and on the “being in the world” (在 *zai*). In addition, Ge foregrounds the change in mode of narration, with a shift from superpositioned, omniscient perspective to a third person narrator whose narrative the readership is no longer obliged to trust. In effect he describes the transposition from a detached, priestly or judge-like narrative voice to the storytelling of a flawed and unreliable everyman who is inextricably involved in the story being told. This individualistic narration is further defined through the replacement of the morally orientated spiritual narrator (伦理的灵魂的人 *lunli de linghun de ren*) with the subjective voice of a sensual and carnal human being (感性的身体的人 *ganxing de shenti de ren*).

The individualistic writers of the post-Mao era are considerably indebted to a new philosophy of the body, which is outlined through references to terms such as privacy, non-rationality and desire. As such this philosophy is diametrically opposed to the “soul’s philosophy” (灵魂性哲

²⁷ See Lu 2007: 219, fn. 1.

学 *linghunxing zhexue*), which previously reigned in literature. This aesthetics was defined primarily by its rules of prohibition and reason, all of which were subordinated to the intention of preserving the prevailing moral order.

In his article Ge mentions two female writers: Lin Bai and Chen Ran. In their writings he discovers female bodies made of flesh, which is neither lofty nor idealised, and consequently no longer a rhetoric proxy for ideals of beauty and kindness. The body rather has become the somaticised mode of existence of a female subject. Similarly, in the male author Zhu Wen's 朱文 (b. 1967) novel *Wo ai meiyuan* 我爱美元 (I love dollars, first published in the year 1994) the father-son protagonist pair no longer represent the ideas of authority and filial piety. Instead they exist firmly in the mortal world as equal, and corporeal men. In general, the body these writers refer to no longer lacks materiality. That does not however alter the important fact that Ge's theoretical analysis is not rooted in any gender-oriented reflection; the material body in his analysis remains undifferentiated and a universal one.

As previously mentioned, in his early articles Ge Hongbing does not explicitly refer to the concept of body writing. He defines this phenomenon in the later publication *Body Politics*. The fifth chapter of this book bears the heading "Shenti xiezuo – qimeng xushi, geming xushi zhihou: shenti de houxiandai chujing" 身体写作——启蒙叙事，革命叙事之后：身体的后现代处境 (Body writing – after the enlightened, revolutionary narration: postmodern setting of the body) which is specifically dedicated to the body writing phenomenon (Ge & Song 2005: 93-110).

In this chapter Ge and Song define the body writing phenomenon not only as being closely related to the overcoming of revolutionary aesthetics, but also to the eventual emergence of the modern consumer society. To introduce this point, the authors focus first on the fitful ascent and descent of visibility, relevance and meaning of the body (身 *shen*) in Chinese history. Ge and Song's opinion of ancient body politics is illustrated by the statement that after Mencius and particularly with the latter influence of Xunzi (荀子, 298-238 B.C.), a continual de-somatisation, culturalisation, and sublimation of the body took place in Chinese philosophy and literature:

后世中国人不重视“身”。对“身”的外形美，尤其是对男人的外形美没有固定的看法，甚至是极端不重视。《西游记》中把孙悟空和猪八戒看成是“人”，中国的读者可能也从来没有把孙悟空和猪八戒当成动物来看，中国的读者没有因为他们是猴子、猪猡的外形而把他们看成动物，为什么？这和儒家身体观有关系，儒家不是从身体的外形来看入的，而是从“心”、“志”、“神”“气”上来看人的。(…)《西游记》是一部描写佛教故事的小说，但是，它骨子里却是儒教的，它让孙悟空来自石头，原因是它

需要孙悟空作为一个伟大的反叛者完全“没有性别”，这是封建儒教对圣贤的身体要求——它应该没有情欲。(Ge & Song 2005: 20)

In later ages Chinese people did not attach great importance to “the body”. They did not have fixed standards to judge the beauty of body shape, most notably of the male body, even to the point of entirely ignoring it. In ‘The Journey to the West’ Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie are referred to as humans, it is perhaps possible that the Chinese audience has never perceived Sun Wukong and Zhu Bajie as animals. For what reason, even despite their animal forms, did the Chinese readership not perceive them as such? It is connected to the Confucian notion of the body that derives from the ideas of “xin” (mind), “zhi” (ideals), “shen” (spirit), and “qi” (vital energy) and not from the outlines of the body. (...). Although ‘The Journey to the West’ is based on Buddhist tales, it is thoroughly Confucian. For this reason Sun Wukong must originate from a stone, he must be a completely “sexless” rebel. This is the condition placed by Confucian feudal society on the sage’s body – it must be free of all potential for desire.

The modern setting of the body is demarcated by a revolutionary consciousness that originates from two cultural and ideological transitions in twentieth-century Chinese history. The authors devote two chapters of *Body Politics* to the May Fourth Movement and the proletarian revolution respectively. At the beginning of the twentieth century the recently proposed modernist approach to the body was, according to Ge and Song, based on a “theory of human nature” (人性论 *renxinglun*). The crucial metaphors associated with the body in the writings of this period are those of sickness, cure and medicine (Ge & Song 2005: 63-64).

Ge and Song define revolution as a complex set of various grand narrations, which by means of propaganda, agitation, law and art are used to discipline and control the bodies. In the case of the proletarian revolution, the body regime it enforces is based on the notions of “(military) struggle (战斗 *zhandou*)” and “physical work (劳动 *laodong*)”. Typical narratives from this period do not centre on the features of a static human body, but on the body’s performance of manual work.²⁸ As a consequence, the real value of the body could only emerge in the exercise of physical work or, alternatively in times of war, in sacrifice. That is the overall trend in the revolutionary narrative.

In Ge and Song’s opinion the first to subvert this revolutionary mode of narration was the female writer Tie Ning 铁凝 (b.1957). In her novel titled “Mei you niukou de hong chengshan” 没有纽扣的红衬衫 (Red blouse without a button, 1982) the red blouse without a button, worn by a middle school students stands for an individual clothing style. Here the “dress-body complex” (Chen 2003) no longer codifies the mere aesthetics of the revolution, but points to the emergence of a set of individualistic values in the Chinese post-revolutionary society.

²⁸ As in other countries soc-realistic aesthetics focused on the performance of specific tasks by the workers, athletes or soldiers.

In the following chapter, Ge and Song segue directly from revolutionary body aesthetics to postmodern body politics, which according to them, permeate the body writing phenomenon and Lower Body poetry.

Literary works addressed by use of these two labels, differ from the preceding enlightened and revolutionary narratives. They reintroduce the previously silenced body discourses (身体话语 *shenti huayu*) in the distinct setting of the contemporary consumer society. In these postmodern narratives and poetry the material body, a mere shape of existence (生存形式 *shengcun xingshi*), is understood by Ge and Song to be the object which displaces the former embodied modern subject. Ge and Song consider the consuming and to-be-consumed body as a form of rebellion against the “true nature of the self” (自我本性 *ziwo benxing*).

In the fifth chapter of their publication the authors eventually deliver an explicit comprehensive definition of the body writing phenomena:

身体写作意味着:写作通过亲近、疏离、分拆、瓦解等等手段,不断地对身体进行再想象、再塑造、再规划,它脱离启蒙叙事和革命叙事,通过写作这种方式,不断地切入到当下的后现代处境中,成为动荡不定的现实性的一部分,或者我们应该说,它通过再造自己的幻想而让自己在后现代消费政治中成为核心的景观之一。(Ge & Song 2005: 93)

Body writing means the writing's unceasing re-imagining, re-modeling and re-planning, all focussed on the body and achieved by means of coming closer, or of becoming estranged from, on dismantling and disintegrating. The body breaks away from the enlightened and revolutionary narratives and through writing remains constantly within the contemporary postmodern setting. It becomes part of the uneasy unstable reality, or we should say, following the fantasy of self re-moulding, it itself becomes the crucial landscape of the postmodern consumer politics.

Notably, the author and the writing subject behind the body writing is not initially referred to at all. Ge and Song reduce the writing self to the desiring, consuming and consumed body. According to them Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby* is a prototypical example of this economy of consumption, in that the body's drive to consume is supposed to originate in its will to overcome the anxiety of being eventually abandoned on the refuse heap of consumer society. As a consequence, the body has to reshape itself again and again in order to remain consumable.

In the second part of this chapter, entitled “Daxie de shenti: biaoshu shenme, zenme biaoshu” 大写的身体: 表述什么, 怎么表述 (The body writ large: what must be articulated and how to articulate it), Ge and Song differentiate between the body writing of the older authors from the new born generation (born in the late 1950s and 1960s) and that of the younger ones (born in the 1970s or later). The most prominent representatives of the first group are Han Dong 韩东 (b. 1961), Zhu Wen, Ge Hongbing, Chen Ran, and Lin Bai.

According to Ge and Song in their works a “body writ large” emerged for the first time, prompting resistance to current ideology and established modes of writing. Consequently, the very beginning of body writing was the (re)discovery of the body in literature, together with the recognition of the fact that the writing subject is an embodied one. In their literary works, the body remains attached to the subject’s self (主体自我 *zhuti ziwo*) and is part of her/his being in the world.

In contrast, it may be seen that in what Ge and Song call “postmodern body writing”, the subject dissolves and is reduced to a mere object of the body and its orgasmic pleasures/*jouissance*. In their opinion the writing of Wei Hui, Mian Mian and Wei Wei itself is no longer attributed to any emancipative or subversive project. On the contrary, Ge and Song perceive it as being equally reductive and oppressive as the former ideological works. It is the plain bodyspace that remains:

这是一代只有自我而没有世界的作家，他们的自我定性仅仅限于身体的疆域之内。(Ge & Song 2005: 101)

This is a generation of writers that only [inhabits] the self, but they do not [inhabit] the world. The borders of their selves are strictly limited to the inner spaces of their bodies.

According to Ge and Song, the ongoing decentralisation and annihilation of the subject reached its apogee in the Lower Body poetry. Consequently, they do not recognise any emancipatory potential in Lower Body’s verses, but only bodily drives and aimless sojourning. Ge and Song perceive a deprivation of any meaning for their poetry, which remains outside the dialectics of ideology:

(...) 对意义的彻底消解，是下半身写作的一个重要特征，“身体”不能承载革命叙事中的意识形态功能，同样也不能承载早期新生代作家所寄寓的反意识形态功能，身体是没有功能和意义的，它无所谓意义，身体应当处于对“意义”这个规驯物的抵抗状态之中，身体被认真还原了。(Ge & Song 2005: 105)

The thorough dispelling of meaning is the Lower Body’s distinctive feature. “The body” cannot bear the ideological function [to which it is ascribed] in the revolutionary narrative; similarly, it cannot bear the anti-ideological function, temporary lodged by the older newborns. The body has no function and no meaning. It is indifferent to meanings. The body should be in a condition of resisting “meaning” that is a means of disciplining and taming. It has been returned to its original condition.

The strength and the aesthetic novelty of the Lower Body poets lies in the simple fact that they simply do not care about anything more than bodily drives and lust; a stance which entirely corresponds with their acclaimed deep disregard for intellectual writing, language and ideals. They do not rebel against authority, they simply do not care anymore.

Similarities may be observed between the evaluation of the Lower Body by Ge and Song and that of Maghiel van Crevel (2008). The latter associates the “Yin Lichuans” with an Earthly aesthetic, defined by the following attributes: quotidian, colloquial, anti-, pre- or non-cultural, anti-lyrical, anti-mythical, mundane, realist, relative, ordinary, authentic, indigenous, local, bodily and popular (2008: 25). Ge and Song refer to the Lower Body aesthetics as delineated by that what may be seen as vulgar, coarse, earthy and Punk. All three scholars clearly locate the Lower Body in the urban jungle of contemporary China.

Significantly, van Crevel nevertheless does not see evidence for the schism between the Lower Body poets and their elder newborn siblings. Where Ge and Song identify an unprecedented (lack of) quality, van Crevel sees a directly contrasting defined lineage and a continuity, marked by milestones erected by the older poets Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954), Han Dong, and Yi Sha 伊沙 (b. 1966). While van Crevel perceives an expression of social concern in the Lower Body’s poetry, Ge and Song observe nothing more than a purely aesthetic turn towards the lower rungs of society that manifests itself in the thematic and linguistic layers of the Lower Body writing. Nevertheless, in both publications this literary trend is perceived as avant-garde. In addition, van Crevel analyses the performative aspects inherent in the writings of members of the Lower Body movement (2008: 329). He specifically mentions the suitability of the Lower Body poems to recitation (2008: 329), in which they naturally display their affinity to other popular urban genres such as scat, rap or hip hop. Ge and Song’s limited interest in the linguistic features and the acoustic aspect of poetry slams perhaps originates from the fact that they refer to “writing” in general, without making any allocation into different genres. As a consequence, they speak of the poetics and aesthetics of certain written texts, or more often of a distinct literary phenomenon such as body writing, yet remain indifferent to whether the work is one of poetry or fiction.

Additionally, it would seem that Ge and Song take the Lower Body’s manifesto by Han Shaobo at a face value, reading the following statement literally:

(...) 语言的时代结束了，身体觉醒的时代开始了。(Han 2000: 4)

(...) the time of language has come to an end, and the time of the awakened body has begun (translated in: van Crevel 2008: 317).

As a possible consequence, they do not refer to distinguishable poetic features and avoid a close reading of the Lower Body poems. At the same juncture van Crevel admits certain uneasiness and expresses his distrust towards the acclaimed bankruptcy of poetical language. In his opinion, the move back to language and back to poetry itself in theoretical reflection is

still meaningful and legitimate. From his perspective, the Lower Body is just another avant-garde poetry movement with typical features, such as the delivery of manifestos and meaningful texts, which must be closely scrutinised for sense. Moreover and of no less importance, it is an engaged poetry movement, bound by social concerns. Ge and Song on the other hand reduced their interpretation of Lower Body writings to regarding them as superficial and symptomatic for the postmodern state of being. They align them, as in the case of the Beauty Writers, to a hollowed-out bodyspace, with an object constituted of organs wrapped in skin and no longer inhabiting the outer social space, even though the Lower Body's "hollowing out" is of a different kind than that of the "Shanghai Babes". It is no longer the body writers' reduction of the body to an obsessive "HEIGHT [emphasis in the original] – drive", but a thorough pauperisation of the writing, human subject (Ge & Song 2005: 99). What remains at stake in both cases is the question of the writing subject's self-positioning. While Wei Hui, Mian Mian and Wei Wei represent the standpoint of urban consuming and consumed bodies, the Lower Body poets are accused by Ge and Song of lower-class mimicry:

“一无所有” 赤裸的他们深深地把自己埋葬在消费主义城市废墟之中，他们让自己最大程度地是一个“一般人”，以“一无所有”的空屋姿态写出“下半身”的美学宣言。(Ge & Song 2005: 108)

Not owning a thing in the world, naked, they buried themselves deeply in the ruins of the city of ideological consumption. They allow themselves to be the ultimate commoners, and stage themselves as dispossessed, empty-handed while [they] write out the Lower Bodies aesthetic manifesto.

In the following, Ge and Song highlight the Lower Body's contradictory features:

下半身写作，在中国，是空无的代名词，是反抗，同时也是妥协；是先锋的，同时也是保守的；它创造了一个特殊的美学时代：物质极端繁荣之下的精神真空化，无所有，也沉迷于无所有的“身体狂欢”。(Ge & Song 2005: 108-109)

In China Lower Body writing stands for the void. It is resistance, but at the same time it is compromise, it is avant-garde and at the same time it is conservative. It creates a peculiar aesthetic era: the exhaustion of the spirit and a “bodily carnival” that wallows in dispossession in the wake of an excessive boom of matter.

Here once again Ge and Song point to the hollowed-out subject of consumer-oriented postmodern society. The Lower Body generation's aimless sojourning, their self-identification as postmodern knight-errants or virtual “poetry rivers and lakes” (诗江湖 *shi jianghu*), is characterised by Ge and Song as simply melting away of the subject in decadent carnal *jouissance*. Van Crevel's analysis is more nuanced, he notices that the ideological vacuum,

within which the speaking subject may be located, is indeed a prevalent feature of the transforming Chinese society.

Finally, it should be mentioned that in their lengthy analysis of postmodern body writing, Ge and Song do not clarify their perception of postmodernity. They seem to use this term as a synonym for post-industrial consumer society, without referring to any local variation of this concept. They do not regard bodily practices as being contingent on particular gender or economic inequalities. In other words, even if they appreciate the embodied individual (the human and the body concurrently “writ large”), they remain silent on the conditions of her/his local embeddedness. It would appear that their only intention is to highlight the decentralisation and abandonment of the universal human agent in contemporary “postmodern” body writing.

Xie Youshun 谢有顺 (b. 1972) is another scholar who has pursued a body-centred approach in literary and culture studies. He cooperated closely with the colloquial poet (van Crevel 2008: 247) Yu Jian. In their early joint publication “Xiezu Shi Shenti de Yuyanshi” 写作是身体的语言史 (Writing is the body’s textual history, 1999) these two authors elaborate diverse aspects of body’s coming into writing in great detail.

Analogously to Ge Hongbing, they posit that literary creation originates in the existential situation of “being” (存在 *cunzai*), but can only be realised through the embodied writing person. Only (s)he in her carnal form can facilitate the embedding of this concept into time and space:

身体是说出他作为一个存在着的在场，他是出现在诗歌里面的，不是跟诗歌脱离关系；他作为一个有身体的存在着，生活在这个世界上，他身体所感知，接触和遇见的每一件事，都跟他的写作有关，惟有如此，他的写作才是一种在场的写作。(Yu & Xie 1999: 191)

The body [of the author] declares the presence of its existence as a being, it appears in poetry and cannot be divorced from it; existing as a body, it lives in this world, and everything the body feels, touches and encounters is relevant to its writing. Only thus can its writing be “eyewitness” writing.

Xie developed many of the concepts mentioned above in a more systematic way in his later article “Wenxue Shentixue” 文学身体学 (Literary somatics, 2001). In this article Xie elaborates on the revolutionary shift in mainland China’s literature in the 1990s. He claims that from that point onwards the literary discourse has been increasingly grounded in the writing subject’s body. Consequently, the body became the new impetus for the literature of this period.

In general, Xie agrees with Ge and Song on recent tendencies in culture and literature. They

share the notion of a historical stasis or even regress in the development of literature, with its symptomatic silencing and erasure of the body in the mainstream and the perceived upper echelons of artistic production. Furthermore, they agree that this process was not reversed until the post-Mao era. Finally, these authors regard the latest literary trends associated with the emergence of the Beauty Writers and the Lower Body poets as another shift from emancipatory, embodied literature to a reductive hegemony of flesh and bodily drives. They argue that the bodily driven progress of creative forces in literature has found a dead end in banal depictions of repetitive carnal excesses.

Their critiques of the newest developments in mainland China's literature, however, come from different standpoints. Ge and Song blame the postmodern consumer society, together with the decadent post-ideological stance, for the body writing's failure. Xie focuses on the lack of individualism and on the reductive character, which in his opinion is typical for these literary standpoints. The departure point of his analysis is at first highly affirmative, as he equates the emergence of the body in literature with the closure of the Cultural Revolution. For him there is no true emancipation of the individual without the emancipation of the body. The yokes of the oppressive somatophobic tradition, regardless of their origins, have to be destroyed. That can only happen in the course of a re-embodiment of no-body literature:

古代的“诗言志”，当代的“文学为政治服务”，这些文学主张从来都是反身体的。（...）失去了身体的文学，只能让“志”，“仁”，“义”，“政治”一统天下。（Xie in Wang 2004: 194）

（...）没有身体的解放就没有人的解放，没有与身体细节密切相关的日常生活的全面恢复，也就没有真正的人性基础和真正的文学表达。（Ibid.: 196）

The ancient “the poem articulates what is intently on the mind” [Owen 1996: 40], the contemporary “literature serves politics” - these views on literature were always opposed to the body. （...）

Literature that has lost the body can only let “ambition”, “benevolence”, “righteousness” and “politics” reign the world.

[L]iberation without the body is [equal to] liberation without the human. If there is no comprehensive restoration of everyday life with all its details closely connected to the body, there is nothing that real human nature could be based on and there is also no true literary expression.

Xie's contribution has to be read as an implicit polemic with the notion that it was especially the women writers' emancipative and self-empowering gestures that originally led to a “(re)somatisation” of post-Mao fiction. He proposes an alternative viewpoint and attributes the avant-garde revolutionary influence to colloquial poetry:

据说身体写作的发起者是一批女性小说家，是她们率先将身体向文学开放，并以私人身

体经验的书写取得了新的文学入场券——至少有许多研究者是这样指认的。其实这里面存在者错读。要说对于身体叙事的探索，诗歌界显然比小说家开始得更早。但现在是一个诗歌被边缘化，小说成为主流的文学时代，所以，没人会注意诗人们说了些什么，“身体写作”的桂冠自然就落到了一群女性小说家的头上，并成为一些人阐释女性文学的主要视角。(Ibid.: 102)

It is said that body writing was originally initiated by a group of women fiction writers. [They are said to be the ones who] launched the opening of the body towards literature and moreover with their descriptions of private bodily experience they acquired a new admission ticket to the field of literature. At least many researchers identify them [as such], but this is actually a misreading. As for the exploration of the bodily narratives, poets obviously did it earlier than novelists. It is however an era of marginalisation of poetry, in which fiction became mainstream literature. Because of that nobody cares about the poets' words. The laurel of "body writing" naturally falls on the heads of a group of female novelists, furthermore, it became the main standpoint from which women's literature is interpreted.

What is at stake is no less than the laurel for leadership of the body-driven revolution in poetical language. According to a large number of critics it was the women's poetry of the late 1980s that accelerated the re-embodiment of mainland China's literature. Xie does not ascribe any importance to the contribution of these poets, in fact he does not even mention it. On the contrary, he blames women writers for lowering the quality of literature by endlessly repeating popular (quasi-) autobiographical patterns in their writing.

In Xie's opinion poets are invariably avant-garde labourers who are responsible for launching literary revolutions. In the case of the turn to the body in Chinese literature, poets are those who explore its extremes and limits. As opposed to Ge and Song's investigation, Xie is interested in the Lower Body poetry formation and not just its most visible leading members i.e. Shen Haobo and Yin Lichuan. In his article, Xie includes numerous quotations from the Lower Body manifesto, drafted by Shen Haobo, which opened the first issue of the *Lower Body* journal. In accordance with the aforementioned van Crevel, Ge Hongbing and Song Geng, Xie contrasts the earthy, low aesthetics of the Lower Body with the elevated, sublime poetry of the intellectuals. Furthermore, Xie speaks of the Lower Body poets' achievements as being an example of "literary performance art" (文学行为艺术 *wenxue xingwei yishu*) and at the same time questions their affiliation to the field of literature. He argues for an ongoing exploration of the literary space between these two extreme poles of sublime and hedonist poetry. Xie is convinced that the carnal revolution in Chinese literature is far from being complete.

"The body" has remained an important term within Xie's critical vocabulary. In 2003 he published another collection of essays titled *Shenti xiuci* 身体修辞 (Bodily figures of speech), in which he scrutinises works of members of the new-born generation and new

humankind (*xin renlei*) since the 1990s. In this publication he states his uneasiness with wide ranging labels such as “feminism” (*nüxingzhuyi*) and “body writing” (Xie 2003: 43). He strongly opposes the notion of feminist critical discourse and refuses to acknowledge a conceptualisation of authorship in relation to sex / gender difference.

Somewhat surprisingly, in this publication Xie strongly revises his former opinions on Mian Mian. He speaks in favour of some of the works by other young female authors. Xie not only regards their works as worth reading, he moreover perceives the way in which they stage themselves as a reinvention or redefinition of the traditional understanding of authorship. He points to the fact that these young female authors both changed the literary discourse and caused a true stir in the literary scene prior to reaching the status of literary celebrities labelled Beauty Writers. Xie regrets that, due to the uproar caused by these young women’s eccentric self-staging on the literary market, their works themselves were too often neglected (Xie 2003: 84).

Furthermore, Xie Youshun does not hesitate to place Wei Hui’s works (with stress on the earlier publications) in the same league with other recognised authors, such as Zhang Ailing and Wang Anyi and thus establishes a new lineage of female Shanghai storytellers. He underlines the significance of this unique urban environment for the aesthetic coming of the Beauty Writers.

(...), 但阶段的人物, 我认为, 只能是张爱玲, 王安忆, 卫慧。这三个人的小说, 成功地构成了一部 20 世纪上海演变史, 无论是物质方面的, 精神方面的, 还是情欲方面的 (...). 到了卫慧, 则开始面对全球化语境下新一代青年的生活, 这些人物和生活 (...)有着完全不同的面貌, 它们是断裂的, 混乱的, 时尚的, 叛逆的, 做秀的, 物质化的 (Xie 2003: 120-121)

Only three of them are epochal figures, Zhang Ailing, Wang Anyi, Wei Hui. Novels by these three authors are successfully composed histories, chronicling the changing city of Shanghai. No matter whether with regard to the material aspects [of this transformation], spiritual aspects or emotional aspects (...), in the case of Wei Hui we begin to face the life of the youth of a new generation in the context of globalisation. These characters and their lifestyles (...) have an entirely different outer look, they are fragmented, chaotic, stylish, rebellious, brash, materialistic...

Xie sums up Wei Hui’s role in contemporary literature with exactly the same words he had earlier found suitable with regard to the Lower Body poetry group. In this case, however, he does not accuse Wei Hui of utopian flash-ism. His judgement falls in favour of the young female writer’s literary depictions of the common desire called Shanghai:

(...), 与其把卫慧看做是一个文学事件, 还不如把她的存在看做是一场文学的行为艺术

，或者是一个当代上海情欲传奇的寓言。（...）在卫慧这一批作家的身后，上海再不是原来的上海了，她发生了微妙的变化，似乎成了许多人都沉浮其间的庞大的情欲集散市场，里面充满了各种的机会，诱惑，矛盾和挣扎。（Xie 2003: 121）

Wei Hui's existence should be regarded rather as a form of literary performance art than as a literary accident, or as an allegory of the libidinal legends of contemporary Shanghai. [...] After the emergence of Wei Hui and her aligned writers Shanghai is no longer the Shanghai it once was. The city transformed in a subtle way, as if it became a huge market place for collecting and distributing the carnal pleasures of a multitude. Its confines are filled to the brim with all sorts of opportunities, temptations, contradictions, and struggles.

These observations somehow seem to carry an exceptional meaning when compared with other statements in Xie's other works. In those following *Bodily Figures of Speech*, he posits himself once more in opposition to the Beauty Writer's literature. "The body" remains an important critical concept for him, however only when accompanied by the notion of the "soul" (灵魂 *linghun*), as it was in "Literary Somatics".

In the year 2009 Xie published an essay collection dedicated to mainland Chinese literature published since 1985. The essay "Literary Somatics" is again included without editorial changes as the second part of a larger chapter titled "Shenti, sushi yu linghun" 身体, 俗世与灵魂 (Body, secular world and the soul, in Xie 2009: 229-277). In this chapter's third part Xie Youshun finally outlines his own normative definition of body writing:

（...）真正的身体写作，就是要把身体从黑暗的空间里解救出来，让身体与精神具有同样的出场机会。（Xie 2009b: 270）

（...）True body writing wants to rescue the body from a dark space, and to offer equal chances for the staying of both the body and the spirit.

Overall this explanation may be regarded as a variant of his former definition of the *wenxue shentixue*, which was posted as a positive perspective and furthermore as an alternative to the dead ends of the carnal utopias in contemporary Chinese writings:

这就是我对文学身体学的初步理解：它不是灵魂的虚化，也不是肉体的崇拜，而是肉体的紧紧拉住灵魂的衣角，在文学中自由的安居。（Xie in Wang 2004: 212）

This is my initial understanding of the learning of the literary somatics: it is neither the emptying out of the soul, nor is it admiration of flesh. It is rather the fleshy robe tightly enfolding the soul and their unrestrained peaceful dwelling in [the house of] literature.

In Xie's view, the relation between the body's ethical and physiological aspects is dialectic in nature. The complete body can only emerge as a synthesis of these two features. What applies to the human body is also valid in the field of literary production. In Xie's opinion valuable

literature concerning itself with mere flesh, or the plain soul, does not exist. Real writing cannot be reduced to either of them.

In the same year Xie Youshun published a further article, in which he gives an example of a potential paragon of authentic literary voice. It belongs to the female migrant factory worker, Zheng Xiaoqiong. In Xie's opinion Zheng's writing defies all attempts at categorisation:

对于郑小琼，有些人试图以“打工诗人”，“地层写作”，“女性写作”等概念来命名她，但是，这些名词对郑小琼来说，显然都不合身。命名总是落后于写作实际，正如生活总是走在想像力的面前。真正的写作，永远是个别的，无法归类的。(Xie 2009: 28)

When being confronted with Zheng Xiaoqiong, one attempts to label her with the help of concepts like “migrant worker poet”, “writing of the lower strata”, “women's writing” etc., however all these labels are obviously ill-fitting. Naming always falls behind the actual practice of writing, precisely as life runs ahead of imagination. Real writing forever remains something else, individual and specific, it escapes all categorisation.

To conclude, Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry presents a counterpoint to the commercialised, market-oriented literary productions branded by Xie as “body writing” or “private writing”.

In addition, Xie notices a turn to the body not only in the field of literary production, but also in the field of literary criticism. With reference to only two examples from the year 1993, that of Jia Pingwa's 贾平凹 (b. 1952) novel *Feidu* 废都 (Ruined capital) and Yu Jian's poem “0 Dang'an” 0 档案 (File 0), he points out that these originally unacknowledged works later received much critical acclaim. In 2009 he observed that the body simply became one of the critical terms and the equally critical involvement with bodily discourses became institutionalised. His own theoretical writings, next to those of Ge Hongbing, Song Geng, Nan Fan and many others, provide an important example.

Facing the Medusa: body writing and *écriture féminine*

The works of Ge Hongbing (alone and together with Song Geng) and Xie Youshun represent major parts of the corpus of original mainland Chinese writing about the body, be it from a philosophical, cultural or literary point of view. Strikingly, their numerous contributions lack any gender-oriented analyses of the body within the broader topic of the various body rhetoric. These authors' attention to gender does not reach any further than an accidental critique of the alleged hyper-visibility of “women writers” within the highly commercialised urban publishing market.

On the opposite pole of the critical continuum, that of gender-oriented literary theory, Xu Kun and Dai Jinhua may be regarded as constants, having held prominent positions since the

1980s. Among male literary critics, Nan Fan and Chen Xiaoming continually exercise methodologies central to gender-oriented literary theory, even if not necessarily as the focal point in their readings of Chinese texts.

Inquiries into the body turn in contemporary literature formed part of the academic endeavours of other authors, although never to the extent reached by Ge Hongbing and Xie Youshun. For instance, Chen Xiaoming's remarks on the Lower Body poetry group in his *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue zhuchao* 中国当代文学主潮 (Trends in contemporary Chinese literature, 2009) differ from the critical positions discussed above. In opposition to Ge, Song and Xie he does not refuse to acknowledge the existence of a gendered dimension in literature. In his publication he points to the most visible Lower Body's female member, Yin Lichuan, as being the last to be discussed in the lineage of women poets who became active in the mid-1980s. In his opinion, Yin inherited the rebellious attitude of older poets (e.g. Zhai Yongming or Yin Lei) toward the traditional notion of gentle and magnanimous femininity. Differing here from Ge, Song and Xie, Chen still acknowledges this poetry's maverick character, its subversive stance towards the present and its ability to express hidden tensions of late modernity:

她们的反叛与其说是对消费社会的批判，不如是与其同歌共舞，消费社会的感性解放潮流中，隐含着巨大的欲望焦虑，她们的话语汇入其中，如同塞壬的歌声，充满了致命的诱惑和向死的期待。(Chen 2009: 472)

Rather than taking their rebellious stance for mere critique of the consumer society, it is more suitable to say that they dance and sing on its [postmodern society's] stage. The consumer society's intrinsic tide of sensual and sexual liberation contains extreme anxiety about desire. Their words penetrate it, like siren's voices they are full of mortal seductions and of yearning for death.

Chen's evaluation of the Lower Body's position within the corpus of contemporary poetry is reminiscent of van Cravel's opinion. They both recognise the value of this poetry as a suitable rhetoric of contemporary urbanities fears and anxieties. Moreover, they both identify it as being placed within an already existing lyrical tradition.

In 1996 Nan Fan introduced his concept of "corporeal rhetoric" in an article titled "Quti xiucixue: xiaoxiang yu xing" 躯体修辞学: 肖像与性 (Corporeal rhetoric: representation and sex / gender). He defines it as "the representations / images of a human corpus, coded in a way which corresponds with a specific system of meanings" (Nan 1996: 1).

According to Nan the traditional male-centred rhetoric remained prevalent in Chinese literature until the 1980s. In his opinion, the most striking difference between literary representations of the male sex and its female "other", was that images of men became

meaningful when placed in a historical or political context, whereas women corporeal images remain both deprived of any sovereign historical significance, if not attached to the male subject. The only meaningful role the system of intelligibility foresaw for them was that of a domestic woman. Consequently, Nan argues that the patriarchal system of representations was seriously challenged for the first time in the mid 1980s by Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955) and Can Xue. Mo Yan deconstructed former representations of normative masculinity with his non-hagiographic, sensual male figures, which led, in Nan's own words, to a cultural blasphemy. The grotesque corporeality present in Can Xue's texts was a venomous acid test of the traditional inscriptions of femininity. Together they paved the way for the emergence of a sovereign aesthetics of embodiment.

Nan opens his introduction to novel corporeal rhetoric quoting "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Hélène Cixous. He argues that, when women started to narrate themselves and finally broke out of the confines of male discourses, they did indeed achieve a historical breakthrough. Starting from the zero point of history, this newborn feminine rhetoric first became recognisable in various tales of formation and in the demarcation of new spaces. Nan refers to the examples of Lin Bai's early novel *Yige ren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争 (A war with oneself), which he perceives as a local example of *écriture féminine*. Another example he refers to is Zhai Yongming's early cycle of poems *Jing'an zhuang* 静安庄 (Jing'an Village, 1985), in which the poet shows the transformations of the adolescent female body according to the cyclic changes in nature, whilst at the same time the female body is historicised in the search for a novel matriarchal mythology. In Yin Lei's cycle of fourteen poems titled "Dushen nüren de woshi" 独身女人的卧室 (The single woman's bedroom), new confines are set with the help of a parodic repetition (Butler 1999: 12) of male power over women's quarters. Here it is the woman who refuses to share the spaces on her own with a man: "You don't come to live with me" (你不来与我同居 *ni bu lai gen wo tongju*). In Nan Fan's words within the aforementioned authors' works a new inclusive relationship between literature and female bodies was positively established.

The feminist critique Xu Kun speaks in favour of an affirmation of the female body experience in women's literature (1999: 62). She recognises that in the 1990s the "discovery of the female self" followed the gender-blind, humanistic discussions that prevailed after the Cultural Revolution. Significantly, Xu points out that this inherently heterogeneous decade was crucial for the "successful" (1999: 63) establishment of the gender-oriented scholarship that emerged as a result of a critical, simultaneous involvement with Chinese traditions and Western feminisms. Importantly, the "body's language" effectively transgressed the confines

of the performing arts and gained recognition in the field of literary narrative (ibid.). According to Xu, three female writers, Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and Xu Xiaobin 徐小斌 (b. 1953), were the forerunners of the body narrative mode in literature.

In her reading of Lin Bai's novel *A War with Oneself*, she also suggests an affinity of these body narratives to the concept of *écriture féminine*, which had reached China with the translation (1992) of Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa".²⁹ In the late 1980s and 1990s the female body experience became a focal point of numerous women authors' writings. Lin Bai, Chen Ran, Xu Xiaobin et al. "came to writing" (Cixous & Clément, 1986) and engendered the emergence of a female subject, capable of writing and speaking in her own voice. This was perhaps enabled by the departure from "no-body" literature through the "un-silencing" of the body (Xu 1999, p. 62), leading to a self-conscious, emancipated feminine writing:

女性对“自我”的重新发现和认识，也是从身体开始。女人的书写，从一开始就是以血代墨的书写，她们以纤弱柔韧的血肉之躯，在巨大的菲勒斯机制的合围中，泼墨突围挥洒出一道道殷红的痕迹。(...) 她们想让身体“说话”，让它把对世界的感知诉诸于“语言”表达。(Xu 1999: 74)

Women's re-discovering and re-acknowledgement of the "self" began from the body, as well. Just from the very beginning, in women's writing ink was replaced with blood. They [women authors] used their delicate, pliable and tough bodies made of blood and flesh, splashed ink to break out of the encirclement of the phallogocentric mechanisms leaving strains of crimson traces behind them. (...) They wanted to make the body "speak", to express in language their perceptual prosecution of the world.

Nan and Xu are not the only authors who elaborated on the close connection between body rhetoric, narrative or body writing and Cixous' utopian project of *écriture féminine*. *Écriture féminine* was in fact one of the renditions proposed for the term *shenti xiezu* / body writing. Female authors undoubtedly shared this interest in Cixous' essay with the theorists. A quotation from Cixous opens the first issue of the unofficial journal dedicated to women's poetry, *Wings* (1998). The motto says:

期待是绝对需要的

²⁹ The Chinese rendition by Huang Xiaohong (黄晓红, b. 1951) of Cixous' text was published in 1992. It was based on an English translation that emerged in Marks & de Courtivron (1981: 245-265). The Chinese rendition was published in the first comprehensive anthology introducing Western feminist literary studies to Chinese readers entitled *Dangdai nüxingzhuyi wenxue piping* (Zhang Jingyuan, 1992). Interestingly, in this rendition "women's writing" was translated as *funü xiezu* 妇女写作, a term which was later fully displaced by *nüxing xiezu*. This discursive shift corresponds well with Tani Barlow's elaboration on the signifiers *funü* and *nüxing* as not only linguistic, but moreover political "key terms" (Barlow in Gilmartin, et al. 1994: 339-359).

Anticipation is imperative (Cixous 1976: 875).

Of no less importance is the fact that the journal's title seems to be deliberately chosen in reference to Cixous' flight metaphoric, which is directly addressed in the foreword with a further quote:

飞翔是妇女的姿势 —— 用语言飞翔也让语言飞翔

Flying is a woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly (Ibid.: 887).

The editors state in the last sentence that the literary scene can evade neither the charm of women's poetry nor the hovering nature of poetry itself. This is the reason for naming the space they created "Wings".

The metaphor of flying has however appeared before, in the foreword by Cui Weiping 催卫平 (b. 1956) to the first collection of Chinese women's poetry *Pingguoshang de bao* 苹果上的豹 (A leopard on an apple, 1993). She defined women poets as that part of mankind which is "capable of flying" (会飞行的人 *hui feixing de ren*). Tuning in with Cixous and her utopia of *écriture féminine*, Cui foregrounds the inevitability of the move inward and towards the body for women writers who had left the beaten track of patriarchal language:

在离开了既定的轨道之后，写作的人和下地狱的人一样，都被逼回自身，甚至逼回为肉身，肉体正是自我撤退中最后的领地。如果说写作中的女人（尤其是写诗的女人）比别的女人更容易感到她们的身体，这是因为她们无路可走，此时的欲望是被语言调动起来的，是被编入语言的网络之上，供奉在词语的圣坛上的。(Cui 1993: 7)

After they had left the beaten tracks, writers became like those cast down to hell. They were forced to retrieve their selves, even to retrieve their corporeality. Flesh is the very last territory [to be found] within the retreat to the self. If one says that writing women (especially those writing poetry) sense their bodies with greater ease than other women, this is due to their hopelessness. [This is a consequence of the fact that] present desires have been maneuvered by language, woven into language patterns by others, [and] idolised on the sacred altar of language.

It must, however, be mentioned here that the relationship between the body writing phenomena and *écriture féminine* remains a troubled one.

There is an internal tension in Cixous' text: between the "subject" who is never definitely fixed or formed in language, and the category of "woman", which seems to be merely a function of the female body. The first feature allows a new feminine or bisexual discourse; the latter can be reduced through superficial reading to being the establishment of a mystic, eternal female subject. The second "essential" feature of this text may be the reason for associating the body writing phenomenon with women's writing by way of their readership.

What often remained neglected however is Cixous' inquiry into the relationship of women to the symbolic, i.e. to language and her political emancipatory project. The majority of Chinese critique remained blind to these features of Cixous' writing, which disallows binary oppositions and proposes not a project of feminine identity, but a speculation about women's discourse with primary emphasis on a distinct poetic. Consequently, theorists of literature focused on analysing the recurring themes in feminine literature (such as female narcissism, escapism, and homoeroticism) in relation to presumed autobiographical features. As a consequence, feminine literature of the 1990s was largely expected to remain anchored in the sexed writing subject's authentic experience. Yin Lei and Zhai Yongming' early poetry, or fictional works by Lin Bai or Chen Ran have been scrutinised and identified as representing reality, even though the author's deliberate blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction did not remain unnoticed.

Embodying the revolution

In the literary mapping of the body, the notion of revolution remains a crucial term.³⁰ In the aforementioned theoretical works, the body is thematised, either as the target of revolutionary politics, or as the revolutionising agent behind the transformation which literature has recently undergone. Revolutionary embodiment is fulfilled by following the ideals of “asceticism” (禁欲主义 *jinyuzhuyi*), “empowerment” (翻身 *fanshen*³¹), along with “liberation” (解放 *jiefang*) and “control” (控制 *kongzhi*).

³⁰ Not only in mainland China's revolutionary rhetoric and literature, revolution was meant as a means of body engineering. One of the most prominent examples may be found in final passages of Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*:

Man at last will begin to harmonize himself in earnest. He will make it his business to achieve beauty by giving the movement of his own limbs the utmost precision, purposefulness and economy in his work, his walk and his play. He will try to master first the semiconscious and then the subconscious processes in his own organism, such as breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction, and, within necessary limits, he will try to subordinate them to the control of reason and will. [...] Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman. (Trotsky 1924: 207)

³¹ The term is explained by Hilton (1966) as follows:

Every revolution creates new words. The Chinese Revolution created a whole new vocabulary. A most important word in this vocabulary was *fanshen*. Literally it means to “turn the body”, or to “turn over”. To China's hundreds of millions of landless and land-poor peasants it meant to stand up, to throw off the landlord's yoke, to gain land, stocks, implements, and houses. But it meant much more than this. It meant to throw off superstition and study science, to abolish “word blindness” and learn to read, to cease considering women as chattels and establish equality between the sexes, to do away with appointed village magistrates and replace them with elected councils. It meant to enter a new world. (Hilton 1966, vii)

Ge and Song perceive an impact of the revolution on the body through imposed styling and dress regimes. Their approach is similar to Tina Mai Chen's (2003) conceptualisation of the revolutionary body aesthetics in terms of "prismatic constructs of the body-dress complexes"³². They inquire into varying embodiments of class: the clearly positive aspects of the selflessly working proletariat or self-sacrificing soldiers, and the far more complicated and ethereal aspects of the intellectuals (Ge & Song 2005: 82). They focus on an ongoing standardisation of representations of human bodies. Nevertheless, they do not refer to the gendered dimension of class differences. Instead they discuss an ongoing homogenization of representations which Chinese literature of the revolutionary period shares with other soc-realist literatures:

衣着的控制是身体政治非常重要的手段，在革命叙事中，衣着和身体属性一样都出于革命的控制之下，他们不是追求生命个性的领域，相反是革命的表现其功力性的领域，因而也是政治必须照看的非常重要的领域。(Ge & Song 2005: 82)

Control over clothing is a very important method of body politics. In revolutionary narrations, the properties of clothing and bodies alike stem from the commanding demands of the revolution. They are not domains of pursuing individual modes of living, in contrary; they are domains in which the efficacy of the revolution manifests itself. For this reason they are very important domains of implementation of political control.

The same could be claimed, according to Ge and Song, about hairstyles. They analyse the ways these change in a lengthy footnote, in which they mention examples of plaited hair as affiliated to feudal thinking (封建主义 *fengjianzhuyi*), of arranging two hair buns as a sign of sympathising with capitalism (资本主义 *zibenzhuyi*) and of long hair as being affiliated to revisionist ideology (修正主义 *xiuzhengzhuyi*). The importance of the alleged semiotics of different hairstyles for the Red Guards' readings of the bodies reminds Ge and Song of the late Qing queue-cutting movement. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution the *yin-yang* haircut, which was violently imposed on so-called "rightists", was a way of starkly inscribing the fact that one stood under political trial onto the very body of those under suspicion (Ge & Song 2005: 63).

Analogously, violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution are also an important point of Xie Youshun's discussion of revolutionary body politics. He claims (Xie 2001: 192) that all revolutionary movements share the tendency to culminate in an extermination of bodies (be it

³² Chen's research is well structured and grants a fuller insight than Ge & Song's loose remarks. Her article departs from Mao Zedong's comments which "configured clothing, mind and body as a socially embedded complex central to one's identity and one's ability to contribute to the new society" (Chen 2003: 362).

through murder or forced suicide). As a consequence, Xie argues that in periods of social unrest the body becomes the endangered “other”. Everyone was at risk due to the mere fact that possessing a body meant one could lose control of it:

比如, “文革”时期, 你穿什么衣服, 你唱什么歌, 你和谁结婚, 你说什么梦话, 这些纯粹是私人化的身体事件, 都被政治化了, 不容你自己作任何选择, 甚至连身体的血缘关系都可以因着政治的需要而改变 (与父母, 配偶, 儿女划清界限等), 其他的就更不用说了 (…). (Xie 2001: 194)

For example, during the period of the “Cultural Revolution”, the clothes you wore, the songs you sung, the words you uttered in your dreams, all these purely private body acts, became political. There was no tolerance for any decisions you made individually, even consanguinity could be changed accordingly to the political demands (making a clear distinction between oneself and parents, spouse or children etc.)³³, not to speak of all other aspects (...).

Ge, Song and Xie do not recognise any distinct semiotics of the female body in revolutionary writing. They do however observe an adjustment of sentimental narratives to conform to the logic of class struggle, a process that is accompanied by an erasure of privacy within the hegemonic public sphere. The revolutionary force first legitimised itself by advocating and implementing the ideal of free love among equals in addition to the modern laws of marriage. This ideal in turn soon became subservient to the logic of class struggle, while political power moved from “liberation” to “control” of bodies, especially the ideologically improper ones.

Cai Xiang 蔡翔 (b. 1953), in his groundbreaking monograph (2010) dedicated to the revolutionary narrative, highlights a growing tension between “love” and “revolution” which mirrors the conflict-laden binary opposition of individuality versus collective. Agreeing with Ge and Song he points to the emergence of a new notion of love, which was subjected to

³³ The processes remoulding familiar consanguine bounds and the undoing of the traditional notion of kinship during the Cultural Revolution are similarly addressed elsewhere e.g.:

作为这个时期社会氛围的典型事例可以看“样板戏”《红灯记》。在这个“样板”中, 就连以为是一家人的三代人最后都发现没有血缘关系, 只有革命的同志关系和抚育战友遗孤的关系。(Li 2009: 31)

The model opera *The Red Lantern* may be regarded as a typical example of the social climate of this period. In this “model”, all characters belonging to three generations eventually discover that they are not related by consanguinity, all they have is comradeship and the foster parent relation with an orphan left behind by a comrade-in-arms.

这样, 在塑造女英雄形象时, “非家庭化”修辞手段很自然被运用上。这种修辞方式主要是把传统以血缘关系为根据的家庭观念消解, 并以“社会主义大家庭”的新观念和新关系取代之, 或者是把血缘家庭升华为革命大家庭。(Chen 1995: 95)

This way, while portraying the figure of the female hero, the “de-familiarisation” rhetoric was naturally implemented. The most crucial features of this rhetoric were the dispelling of a family concept based on blood relations and furthermore the replacement of the former by the new concept of a “big socialist family” with its intrinsic novel family ties, and the sublimation on the consanguine family to a revolutionary family.

political struggle. Furthermore, this love stories implicitly promoted a “new socialist individual”. They had to exemplify the difference between socialist and capitalist love, e.g. by empowering the lower classes to the feeling of love (“new love”) as equally privileged societal members (Cai 2012: 152, 157)

The representations of the beloved body in the literature of this period change according to the demands of the normative aesthetics of a labouring body. Ge and Song point to a single example of the aesthetically “turned or emancipated body” (*fanshen*), that of a female character from Sun Li’s 孙犁 (1913-2002) novel *Zhengyue* 正月 (First month of the lunar year). The female protagonist’s main features are her big, unbound feet and healthy strong teeth, which posit her beyond any canon of traditional or modern Chinese female beauty ideals. In this short description, a silencing of the sexed human body up to the extent of undoing of gender cannot remain unnoticed as Sun does not refer to any of the primary or secondary sexual characteristics of the women’s body.

The authors of *Body Politics* identify a specific chronotope of the revolutionized body. Submitted to the arbitrary demands of politicised aesthetics, the labouring body belongs to the daytime and is favourably projected onto the background of a construction site. It belongs there in the same way as the gloomy bar nightlife corporeality belongs to “postmodern” body writing (Ge & Song 2005: 80).

No less important though, next to standardised body-dress complexes, is the notion of *fanshen*. The semantic range of this revolutionary term has already been addressed at length by Hinton (1966). Its literary rendition points directly to the body as the revolution’s object. Through the mass liberation of peasants and women, new subjects were created, freed from the feudal yokes, and nevertheless simultaneously objectified by the revolutionary (body) politics. Ge and Song argue for a multidimensionality of the process of “turning over”, which, while aiming at totalising the ongoing social change, demanded for example the transformation of the landlord’s body into a starving one. The lower classes desired, in Ge and Song’s opinion, not only a political *fanshen*, but an equally important aesthetic one. The crucial feature of the latter was the above-mentioned “aesthetic of the labouring body”.

Nan Fan along with Huang Ziping 黄子平 (b. 1949) foreground the processes of gender erasure intrinsic in the *fanshen* phenomenon (even if they do use a question mark):

革命的成功使人们 “翻了身”，也许翻过来了的身体应是 “无性的身体”？ (Huang 1996: 56)

Success of the revolution let people “turn their bodies”, perhaps the turned bodies should be “sexless bodies”?

Significantly, the techniques of unification and homogenisation exercised on bodies in the revolutionary period were those of different dynamics. The aim of through and through class unification was partially pursued through the physical extension of class enemies while progressing toward the realisation of an ideal of a classless society. In the case of gender, processes of erasure of varying improper representations of femininity took place. Other differences that tend to be neutralised in the figure of the new socialist human are that between an adolescent and an adult and those between man and machine.

Cai Xiang argues (2010) that it was not a simple erasure of all sexual desires that became visible in the literature of this period. In his opinion, positive female characters were deprived of femininity and sexuality as representations of revolutionary purity in phallogentric (男性中心主义 *nanxing zhongxin zhuyi*) narratives. He draws further notice to the fact that sexuality became a feature of the pre-revolutionary period and is attached to the vicious representations of individual characters. As a result, in the case of the good and progressive characters, the notion of sexuality became almost impossible to assign (Cai 2010: 163-164).

Similar comments on the prohibition of desires may be found in Chen Shunxin's 陈顺馨 (b. 1954) *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de xushi yu xingbie* 中国当代文学的叙事与性别 (Narration and gender in contemporary Chinese literature). She points to the renewed imposition of traditional views relating to female virtues by the phallogentric revolutionary narratives. Consequently, the liberated "new" woman remained buried by sediments of prerevolutionary feudality (封建 *fengjian*), and furthermore remained a mere object of patriarchal discourses. To gain visibility and illegibility beyond the dichotomist "angel-demon" pattern of feminist representation she had to become a man-like, chaste and ideally androgynous (post-gender) character:

也是在这样的逻辑下，作为理想的女人，女英雄之所以收到歌颂，正是由于她们失却了欲望的能力，变成了佛洛伊德所说的“阉割的男人” (castrated man)，但却能在英雄人物中占一席位。(Chen 1995: 112)

Similarly, according to this logic, as ideal women, the female heroes were eulogised exactly for their loss of ability to desire. They became the Freudian "castrated men", nevertheless they could occupy a position in the rows of hero characters.

Similar opinions may be found in Dai Jinhua's *Wading Boat*. Dai, however, puts the stress on the all-encompassing rhetoric of class struggle:

此间，一种重要的意识形态话语或曰不言自明的规定，将欲望，欲望的目光，身体语言，乃至性别的指认，确定为“阶级敌人”（相对于无产者，革命者，工产党）的特征与标石；而在革命的或人民的营垒之内，同一阶级间的男人和女人，是亲密无间，纯白无

染的兄弟姐妹，同是党和人民的儿女。因此，在工农兵文艺中，被指认的欲望与“爱情”的叙事，是地狱的大门，罪恶的渊薮，是骗局与陷阱，至少是网罗，堕落与诱惑。(Dai 2007: 19-20)

Here, as an important type of ideological discourse self-evidently stipulates: desires, passionate glimpses, body language, even sex features, are all characteristics of “class enemies” (in contrast to proletarians, revolutionaries, and communist party members). On the other hand, within the revolutionary or democratic camp, men and women with similar class background, are on intimate terms with each another, pure and innocents as brothers and sisters. For these reasons, in the workers, peasants and soldier’s art, narratives of desire and “love”, are the gates of hell, the hotbed of all evil, frauds and pitfalls, or at the very least they stand for traps, degeneration and seduction.

Cai Xiang attributes the threat posed by sexuality towards revolutionary action to the fact that it is never fully controllable. Consequently, sexuality was intended to remain confined within a family unit. The idiom of “asceticism” or “prohibition of desires” (*jinzhizhuyi*) has progressively become the main aspect of this period’s literature.³⁴ Concomitantly, the notion of kinship has been transformed into a non-consanguine relationship.³⁵ In accordance with Cai, Dai Jinhua suggested:

(…), 遭放逐的与其说是“爱情”本身，不如说是“身体”。(…) 放逐欲念与“身体”，不仅是为了成就一份克己与禁欲的表述，同时是为了放逐爱情，爱情话语可能具有的颠覆性与个人性。(Dai 2007: 21)

[R]ather than to speak about expelled [representations of] “love”, it is more suitable to speak about [expelled representations of] the “body” (...). The prohibition of desires along with the “body”, was aimed at the expression of self-restraint and asceticism, at the same time it was meant to ban potentially subversive and individual features essential in love and in the discourses of love.

All the above-mentioned characteristics of the revolutionary narratives of the Mao period indicate significant transformations of the “love and revolution” pattern as identified in left-

³⁴ Zhai Yongming referred to this epoch in similar terms, which seem to become the shared vocabulary for narrating gender relations during the Cultural Revolution:

你知道文革时期，对中国女性的要求是怎么样的？我们好像一下子回到了禁欲主义的时代。我现在穿的衣服都是在那个时代不让穿的。60年代末到70年代那一段时间的禁欲风气是最严重的。所有人穿的衣服都是相同，服装无性别之分。

Do you know what were the demands towards Chinese women during the Cultural Revolution? It was as if we at once went back to the epoch of asceticism. Clothes I’m wearing now were forbidden. In the end of the 1960s and the 1970s this trend of desire prohibition was most serious. All people had to wear similar clothes, the garments became asexual. (Personal interview conducted in Beijing in 2010, later published as Zhai, and Yang 2012)

³⁵ Interestingly, in her monograph dedicated to women’s writing in 1905-1948, Yan Haiping thematises even earlier processes of the undoing of traditional kinship bounds which took place during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Those alternative kinships were however forged not under the pressure of the ideological idiom, but under the everyday terror of war (Yan 2006: 139-142).

wing popular literature in the late 1920s. The changing rhetoric followed the new ideal of the socialistic hero able to transgress the limits of his own physicality, while simultaneously being able to control his carnal desires to the utmost degree:

可以说主要英雄人物在“人”的肉身方面的超越，是他们更突出于其他英雄人物的特征之一。(…) 在《艳阳天》还可以看到的爱情心理描写和“革命 + 恋爱”式的关系发展过程，在《金光大道》已几乎完全消失，高大泉与吕瑞芬的结合只基于阶级情而不是爱情，(…)，全都不离斗争，家庭已成为革命阵地之一。(Chen 1995: 244)

It is possible to argue that the transcending of the carnal human body by main heroes was more outstanding as a feature of a heroic figure than any other characteristic. (...) In ‘Bright Sunny Skies’ [1966] it is still possible to find psychological descriptions of love and relations developing according to the “revolution & love” pattern. In ‘The Golden Road’ [1974] these features almost disappeared. The marriage of Gao Daquan and Lü Ruifen is based on mere class intimacy and not on love, (...) it never distances itself from struggle, the family already turn into one of the revolutionary battlegrounds.

These features of these revolutionary narratives were abandoned in the post-Mao period. Concomitantly, the body emerged in theoretical discourse, no longer as a passive object of revolutionary narratives and body politics, but as a crucial term for the literary production of the 1980s. This is why in a chapter titled “Shenti shi ruhe bei gemingde” 身体是如何被革命的 (How the body was revolutionized) of his *Bodily Figures of Speech*, Xie Youshun paradoxically starts his inquiry into revolutionary asceticism with a glorification of the impetus provided by the body to the literature of the 1990s (Xie 2003):

“私人写作”，“七十年代人”，“身体写作”，“下半身”第一系列的文学命名，均与作家本人的身体叙事有关。或者说，身体成了这个时代新的文学动力。(Xie 2003: 13)

“Private writing”, “generation of the 1970s”, “body writing”, “the Lower Body”, the first series of literary labels, is almost entirely related to the writers’ personal body narratives. In other words, the body became the new literary drive of this period.

Analogously, in Ge and Song’s writings (2005), the body is the main agent responsible for several new literary trends of the late 1980s; he illustrates this in his arguments relating to the emergence of the “body writ large”. Neglected by Ge, Song and Xia, nevertheless important in the re-shaping of literature, the body poetic and rhetoric of several female authors in the same timeframe was crucial for the rising intellectual feminist movement of the post-Mao era. In effect, a new semiotic space in which the meaning and very perception of femininity could be rethought was created.

Chapter 3

Poetics of the body: Zhai Yongming and women's poetry since the 1980s

Feminine tradition, women's poetry and the female voice

Is there a female tradition in modern Chinese poetry?³⁶ Two voluminous anthologies of women's writing with a focus on poetry (Chang & Saussy 1999, Idema & Grant 2004) provide evidence enough of the existence of a large group of women poets. In short, it is commonly acknowledged that, with regard to numbers alone, "[n]o nation has produced more women poets than Imperial China" (Chang 2002: 21). At the same time, however, the following opinion coexists with and further problematises this statement:

Just as women have been traditionally marginalized in Chinese society, (...) so, too, have women poets occupied a peripheral place in the literary canon, the range of their poetry bound by literary conventions and moral constraints narrower and more rigid than those for men. It is from this peripheral position, then, that modern women must speak out. (Yeh 1992: xv)

The paradoxical discrepancy between quantity and quality may be explained through careful examination of the different concepts of women's poetry. The majority of women poets from Imperial China may be regarded as belonging to a highly conventional feminine (婉约 *wanyue*) tradition and, as such, habitually considered inferior to their male counterparts by the readers. The skilfully composed "bound" verses of feminine poetry challenged neither the rules of language nor the social order. They remained, like the bound feet, a valuable asset of well-educated elite women.

Only in the twilight of the Qing Empire and the ensuing political and social reorientation did a number of women poets transgress the confines of commonplace femininity (Yeh 1992: xv-xvii, Zhai 2004: 64, Zhang 2004: 30-32). They may be regarded as belonging to a larger reformist movement which aimed, among other things, at the popularisation of a new linguistic medium of literary expression, the vernacular (白话 *baihua*). Even earlier, close to the end of the nineteenth century, Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907), the pioneer of the arising "literary feminism" (Dooling 2005) and gender awareness, voiced her anger. Others, like Chen Hengzhe 陈衡哲 (1890-1976), Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999), and Lin Huiyun 林徽因

³⁶ This is a paraphrase of a question which opens one of Lydia H. Liu's articles: "Is there a female tradition in modern Chinese literature?" (Liu 1993: 33).

(1904-1955), to name but a few, followed Qiu Jin and “swept aside convention”³⁷.

Only many years later, in the second half of the 1980s, did the term *nüxing shige* appear in critical vocabulary (Zhou Zan in Huang 2003: 30). It emerged as the literary world tried to come to grips with the lyrical debut of a young Sichuan poet, Zhai Yongming. The poem sequence “Women”, which was written in 1984 and published in 1985 in the major official literary journal *Shikan*, is widely recognised as marking the birth of the female voice in modern Chinese literature (see Introduction).

Zhai herself has already acknowledged the groundbreaking character of her early works as well. In 2008 she stated in an interview: “The concept of ‘feminist poetry’ (女性主义诗歌 *nüxingzhuyi shige*) didn’t enter the critical discourse until after I wrote ‘Women’”.³⁸ For these reasons Zhai is regarded by some as “China’s first poet of the female sex” (Day 2007).

Tang Xiaodu is thought to have been the first to pinpoint and define the phenomenon of women’s poetry (see Introduction, Zhang Hong Jeanne 2004: 14, Zhou 2007: 123-124). Significantly, in his first article dedicated to this topic, he thematised the differences between the feminine poetry of the past and the women’s poetry of the 1980s:

并不是女性诗人所写的诗歌便是“女性诗歌”；恰恰相反，在一个远非公正而又更多地由男性主宰地世界上，女性诗人似乎更不容易找到自己，或者说，更容易丧失自我。我们已经一再看到这样的的女诗人：她们或者固守传统美学为她们规定的某些表面风格，诸如温柔、细腻、委婉、感伤之类；或者竭力摹仿某些已经成名的男诗人；或者在一种激烈的自我反抗中，追逐某种与自己的本性并不契合的男性气质。

女性诗人所先天居于的这种劣势构成了其命运的一部分。而真正的“女性诗歌”正是在反抗和应对这种命运的过程中形成的。(Tang 1987:58)

It is far from true that all the poems written by female poets are “women’s poetry”. On the contrary: in a world which is certainly not fair and which furthermore is ruled by men, women poets seem to find it particularly difficult to find themselves, or in other words, they lose themselves more easily. We have time and again encountered such women poets: either they are entrenched in modes of expression that traditional aesthetics set for women, e.g. gentle and soft, fine and smooth, indirect, sentimental etc.; or they strive to imitate acknowledged male poets; or else, in fierce opposition to their true selves, they pursue a masculine style of writing that goes against their true nature.

For women poets, this a priori inferior position was part of their destiny. True “women’s poetry” however emerges in a process of resisting and confronting this destiny.

Tang’s article initiated a lively exchange of opinions on the critical value of the concept of

³⁷ The ending of Qiu Jin’s poem “An Inscription for a Portrait of Myself (in Male Dress)” translated in Idema & Grant 2004: 795.

³⁸ Zhai Yongming was interviewed by Andrea Lingenfelter for the online journal *Full Tilt*. Translation by Andrea Lingenfelter.

“women’s poetry”. To date, this discussion is far from being concluded. After the early rejection of the label by almost all women poets who participated in the debate, the term has been re-evaluated, and has gradually gained in relevancy.

In 1989 the journal *Poetry Periodical* launched a discussion on “women’s poetry”, in which it brought together voices by eleven women poets³⁹ belonging to different generations. Their individual statements reveal a lack of consensus on the definitional features of “women’s poetry”.

Older participants of the discussion regard the new lyrical phenomenon either as influenced by the spread of Western feminist ideas to China, or, on the contrary, argue that women, being the emotional sex, bear within themselves a “natural, inborn” inclination towards poetical expression:

(…) 女人缺乏推理能力，而诗是害怕推理；还有，女人有淋漓尽致的想象力，是天生的诗人。(Zheng Min 1989: 6)

(...) women lack reasoning powers, and poetry dreads reason. Moreover, women have vivid imaginations, they are naturally born poets.

The younger poets Li Xiaoyu and Wang Xiaoni similarly strongly oppose the category “women’s poetry”. They perceive it as a possible source of discrimination and essentialisation of women poets whose works should rather, in their opinion, be measured with the same yardstick used for works by men. According to them the sex / gender difference must not enter the critical vocabulary:

因此何必去夸耀女人有卵巢？何必为女人没有精子而愤愤然，惶惶不可终日？
(…)

成为人，你自然就有了成为女人的一切！

去写人类的诗吧，女诗人！何必仅把自己插在“女性诗”媚世的花瓶中！

(Li 1989: 15)

So why brag about women’s ovaries? Why be resentful and in a constant state of anxiety about women’s lack of sperm ?

(…)

Become a human being, and you will spontaneously have everything it takes to be a woman!

Woman poet, go and write human poetry! Why be stuck in the popularity-courting flower vase

³⁹ In the order of appearance: Zheng Ming 郑敏 (b. 1920), Zheng Ling 郑玲 (b. 1931), Yi Lei 伊蕾 (b. 1951), Zhai Yongming, Xiao Gang 晓钢 (b. 1954), Li Xiaoyu 李小雨 (b. 1951), Hai Nan 海男 (b. 1962), Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 (b. 1955), Xiao Jun 小君 (b. 1962), Lu Yimin 陆忆敏 (b. 1962), and Liu Tao 刘涛 (born in the 1960s). Among them Zhai Yongming, Wang Xiaoni, Lu Yimin, Yi Lei, Hai Nan (together with Tang Yaping 唐亚平, b. 1962, who didn’t contribute to this discussion) are recognized by the critique as those who established “women’s poetry” as a novel lyrical mode of expression in the 1980s.

of “women’s poetry”.

“女性诗歌”这个大命题，听起来好像要鼓动一场“革命”，好像要纠集一群人去“对付”另一群人。

(Wang 1989: 17)

“Women’s poetry”, this big topic, sounds like a call to “revolution”, as if it was about to stir up one group against another.

Yi Lei, Zhai Yongming, Xiao Gang and Hai Nan voice anxiety concerning the label of “women’s poetry” and foreground the role of poetic rules and language in their writings. They state their uneasiness with women’s poetry stagnating into a ready-made and fixed pattern (模式 *moshi*), a tendency Zhai Yongming elaborated on in an early critique targeting her fellow poets and literary critics:

“女性诗歌”正在形成新的模式。固定重复的题材、歇斯底里的直白语言、生硬粗糙的词语组合，毫无道理、不讲究内在联系的意象堆砌，毫无美感、做作外在的“性意识”倡导等，已越来越形成“女性诗歌”的媚俗倾向。(…)

真正的“女性意识”不是靠这些固定模式来表现，它必定会通过女诗人的气质在她的作品中有所表现，无论她写的何种题材以及何种表达方式。问题不在于“些什么”，而在于“怎么写”，“写的怎么样”，这才是关键。(Zhai 1989: 11)

“Women’s poetry” is now falling into new patterns. Fixed repetitious themes, hysterically frank language, crude and awkward word combinations, the arbitrary unreflected stringing together of images, the lack of aesthetic feeling in the affected and fake championing of “sexual awareness” etc. all reinforce the trend of “women’s poetry” towards vulgarity (...)

True “female consciousness” does not depend on such fixed patterns for its outward display: its appearance in a poet’s work is a result of the quality of the writer, whatever her subject or her style. The question is not “what to write about” but “how to write”; “how it’s written” is the crucial point.

This discussion, which appeared shortly after the “golden age” (繁荣期 *fanrongqi*) of women’s poetry, 1985-1988 (Zhou 2003: 29), came to its end, may be regarded as the first attempt to scrutinise the concept of women’s poetry. In the following years the term “women’s poetry” was only sporadically employed to denote a legitimate genre or a creative pattern; however, its critical potential has not yet been fully elucidated. Not only academics but also poets have repeatedly spoken in favour of greater conceptual transparency.

Of the eleven participants in the aforementioned debate, Zhai is the only poet who, over the years, has constantly remained an active participant of this theoretical discussion. Her numerous non-fictional and self-reflective essays constitute a valuable documentation of her shifting attitudes towards the notion of women’s poetry and female creativity.

According to Zhai’s writing, it may be assumed that her vivid interest in these topics has been

influenced by two major factors. The first is her affinity to the local art scene and close friendship-cum-cooperation with China's leading female artists. The second factor is the long-lasting exchange and personal acquaintance with the younger poet and academic Zhou Zan.

Chronologically, the essayistic preface to her lyrical debut "Women" named "Black Night Consciousness" was Zhai's first conceptual essay on the topic of female creativity. In 2004 Zhai described this work as an early manifesto of a feminist position (女性主义立场 *nüxingzhuyi lichang*), which found its experimental realisation in the text of the lyrical cycle "Women" (Zhai 2004: 68). Zhai identifies three modes of expression / three phases (层次 *cengci*) in literature by women: the conventional feminine or girlish (女子气 *nüziqi*), the stereotypical feminist (女权 *nüquan*) and the female (女性 *nüxing*). The first is characterised by adherence to male-centred tradition, by sentimentality and a tendency to narcissism. The second approach is narrow-minded and repetitive in its argumentation, it is the opposite of the former. It is only the third, the female approach, that originates in genuine female consciousness and manifests itself in original language and novel forms. Consequently:

(...), 在女子气——女权——女性这样三个高低不同的层次中, 真正具有文学价值的是后者。(Zhai 1985 in Zhang Qinghua 1995: 71)

(...), of these three qualitatively different modes of expression – the feminine, the feminist, the female – only the last has any true literary value.

In terms of travelling feminist concepts, one coincidence may be observed here. In the aforementioned discussion among women poets published in *Shikan*, Liu Tao enumerated exactly the same three modes / phases (层次 *cengci*) as delineated by unspecified "Americans" (美国人 *Meiguoren*) with regard to their "women's literature" (妇女文学 *funü wenxue*): feminine (女子气的 *nüziqide*), feminist (女权的 *nüquande*) and female (女性的 *nüxingde*). Liu, however, criticises this categorisation as overly simplifying:

我们可以沿用此种分类, 将我们的作品也勉强归入其中, 但我感到此种归类太流于简单和狭隘了。(Liu 1989: 21)

We can apply this typology and force our works to match it, but my feeling is that this typology results in oversimplification and narrowness.

It may be assumed that the "Americans" Liu mentions are an indication of the spread of US criticism into the PRC in the early 1980s. Elaine Showalter, a US-based feminist literary critique, proposed a similar typology in her early (1979) work *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. Showalter speaks of three phases in the history of women's literature, which ascend in

chronological order: “the feminine phase (1840-1880)”, “the feminist phase (1880-1920)”, and the “female phase (from 1920)” (Showalter 1979: 137-139). It is, however, difficult to trace any possible inspiration, as neither Zhai nor Liu ever acknowledged any in their works. In addition, they do not refer directly to any chronological arrangement of the different modes of expression / stages in women’s literature. Of no less importance is the fact that Zhou Zan speaks of Zhai’s typology in “Black Night Consciousness” as the poet’s own proposal (Zhou 2005).

Significantly, Zhai later criticised her early attempts at conceptualising women’s writing for their fuzziness and immaturity (Zhai 1995: 234-235). Aside from pointing to flaws in her own texts, she has repeatedly raised her voice against the shallowness and destructive impact of the literary critique:

尽管在组诗《女人》和《黑夜的意识》中全面关注女性自身命运，但我却已倦于被批评家塑造成反抗男权统治争取女性解放的斗争形象，仿佛除《女人》之外我的其余作品都失去了意义。(Zhai 1995: 235)

Although the poem cycle “Women” and “Black Night Consciousness” both comprehensively treat the subject of women’s destiny, I am tired of the critics’ efforts to portray me as an icon of women’s resistance to male domination and the struggle for female emancipation – as if, with the exception of “Women”, all my other writings had become meaningless.

Zhai’s sober remarks mirror her and other poets’ disappointment with the superficial reading of women’s poetry as a genre of political or social manifesto. In addition, Zhai points to an important paradox. After the unconventional women’s poetry emerged on the literary horizon, it very soon became marginalised again – like conventional women’s poetry – by the majority of the literary public. They perceived it as an expression of female excess, aggressive feminism or narcissism performed by a collective of women writers and significant solely for themselves. Female poetics was reduced to a “search for identity”:

事实上“过于关注内心”的女性文学一直被限定在文学的边缘地带，这也是“女性诗”冲破自身束缚而陷入的新的束缚。什么时候我们才能摆脱“女性诗歌”即“女权宣言”的简单粗暴的和带政治含义的批评模式，而真正进入一种严肃公正的文本含义上的批？(Zhai 1995: 235)

As a matter of fact, women’s “excessively introspective” literature has always been marginalised within the field of literature. This also applies to “women’s poetry”, which exchanges one set of fetters for another. When will we finally abandon such simplifying, crude and overly political critical patterns as “women’s poetry” and “feminist manifesto” and truly engage ourselves in strictly impartial textual criticism?

Zhou Zan, a younger poet and academic, was the one to answer Zhai’s question. In May 1998

she was the main force behind the establishment in Beijing of an unofficial journal of and for women's poetry, *Wings* (see Introduction). Zhai was not only one of the poets featured in the opening issue; she also supported the undertaking on the organisational side. In the foreword to the first edition, the editors posited the journal in the field of theory as follows:

女性写作，首先是写作行为的确认，是写作力量的汇聚和增强的意识，是把为女性传达她内在的，深切的生命经验与精神向往视为旨归的努力。女性写作，以一种“策略化的本质”（斯皮瓦克语）立场关注不仅仅由于生理，而且更是由于文化和社会历史所塑就的性别差异及其对于女性心理和创造历程的影响，继而达到对包含了性别文化于其中的文化的反思与批判的目的。(1998)

Women's writing is, first of all, an affirmation of the writing activity; it is a realization of the convergence and consolidation of writing power. It regards the mediation of women's intimate and deep life experience and spiritual orientation as its main objective. Women's writing in the light of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak), and not only from the physiological perspective; furthermore, it is mainly social and cultural history that has moulded gender difference and its impact on women's psychology and creativity; which all leads us to the call for a critical rethinking of the place of gender within culture.

Wings broke with the dominating tendency to equate women's poetry with inborn "female consciousness" alone and started an investigation into the culturally and historically conditioned construction of the female voice. Apart from publishing Chinese women's poetry, it also introduced foreign female poets in translation and has facilitated independent theoretic exchange. The discussion on women's writing conducted with Dai Jinhua and published in the third issue of 2000 marked a milestone in this development. During this exchange, members of the editorial team repeatedly expressed their uneasiness with the essentialising view on women's poetry. At the same time, however, they revealed that a similar fear of being overly biased or exclusive has constantly accompanied their project. Dai strongly supported their efforts to create a space for women's writing. During the discussion she elaborated on her understanding of "women's poetry", which is, in her opinion, primarily a concept bound to a concrete social and historical background:

戴：我认为女性诗歌是个非常历史的概念，它首先是面对漫长的历史所构成的一个现，提出这样一个概念的前提，其实就是指出女性是个弱势群体的事实。弱势是广义的，不光是没有权利，也包括可能女诗人的成就没有男诗人高。（…）所以必须把这个旗子打出来。这里其实有个很痛心的前提，就是说，女性诗歌是一个弱小得多，甚至可以说幼稚得多的群体，因为它没有传统，没有广阔的资源，而且在很长一段时间，也可能提不出自己的美学标准。原因不在于女诗人不能提出自己的美学标准，而在于你提出这些美学标准可能成为自言自语，社会不承认你，社会分享的全部是男性社会中的逻辑。(Dai 2000: 45)

Dai: I think that “women’s poetry” is a very historical concept. First of all, it is faced with a reality that has a very long history: to talk about the antecedents for such a concept means to point to the fact that women are a weak group within society – weakness here in its broad sense, meaning not only lack of power, but also the absence of any women’s achievements comparable to those of men. (...) For these reasons, we need to raise our banner. The past is indeed unpleasant, as women’s poetry is a small and weak thing, you could even say very young and immature, because there’s no tradition, there are no resources to draw on; and that might be the reason why, for a long time, it was impossible for women poets to set their own aesthetic standards. The reason is not that women are incapable of setting their own aesthetic standards; however if you do propose certain aesthetic standards you will probably not be heard, not acknowledged in a society where all that counts is male logic.

Dai, furthermore, elaborated on the importance of *Wings* from a broader perspective, in which she placed the discourse of women’s poetry among other countercultural, anti-corporate global movements:

戴：如果我们说白了，在全球化的今天，我们可做的就是一种“游击战”，即反抗所有大的空间，为什么要去那些大的空间呢？在这个大的空间和完全是朋友交流的圈子空间，中间还有一种象《翼》这样的——一种民刊，一种特定的集合，有着特定的诉求的空间。在这个空间中，它没有任何市场可言，她们不卖它，当然也可能卖不出去。(Dai, Zhou, et al. 2000: 49)

Dai: To be frank, in our times of globalisation, all we can do is engage in a kind of “guerrilla warfare” and oppose all official spaces – why would we want to appear in those large spaces? Between the wide public arena and the small discussion circles restricted to friends, there is something else, for example ‘Wings’ – an unofficial journal, a special meeting place for special aspirations. It is a space where the market does not play: the journal is not for sale – of course it might also well be that it is unsellable.

The emergence of *Wings* and the broadening of its influence beyond a close group of female literary friends widely contributed to the ongoing process of constituting women’s poetry as a valid discourse (Zhang 2003, 2004). Since 1987 and the first analytical contribution by Tang Xiaodu, activities by numerous women poets and feminist critics have made it possible to formulate the following definition:

“女性诗歌”是后毛时代建构起来的话语。关于女性诗歌的定义，边界，语意及形式特征，甚至于它存在的合理性，至今没有达成批评的共识。(Zhang Xiaohong 2003: 53)

“Women’s poetry” is a discourse that arose in the post-Mao era. [It addresses] the definition of women’s poetry, its range and semantics, together with the features of its formulaic realization; it even addresses the question of its legitimacy. [This discourse] has not been hitherto recognised by the critical establishment.

Zhang Xiaohong’s efforts to define women’s poetry as a discourse are summarised in her

main English publication *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China* (2004). Approximately at the same time, Zhou Zan delivered her comprehensive overview of the different concepts significant for the theorisation of women's poetry (Zhou 2002: 29). She draws a line between the concept of "women's poetry" and the less popular "feminist poetry" (see Introduction). The former is, according to Zhou, a cultural or a critical discourse and, simultaneously, a distinct poetic genre. The second designates poetry that expresses a strictly feminist standpoint:

最早提出“女性诗歌”这个概念的是批评家唐晓渡（…），为中国当时的女性诗歌界定了一个时间起点于文化话语的阐释基点。从那时起，中国诗歌界形成过“女性诗歌”的繁荣期（1985—1988），而作为批评话语的“女性诗歌”，其涵义也在参与其中的诗人与批评家的笔下不断的丰富。从批评话语的角度看，“女性主义诗歌”涉及某类特定的题材，并特指一种鲜明的性别话语立场。（Zhou 2002 in Huang & Bu 2003: 29）

The first person to come up with the concept of "women's poetry" was the critic Tang Xiaodu. (...). [He] dated the emergence of contemporary women's poetry and determined the approach of the cultural discourse dealing with it. From then on, Chinese poets contributed to the emergence of the golden age of "women's poetry" (1985-1988). Furthermore, the critical discourse of "women's poetry" and its meaning has been developed and nourished by poets and critics.

Tuning in with Dai, Zhou highlights the indispensability of historicising and contextualising the "women's poetry" phenomenon. The same need applies, according to Zhou, to related critical concepts such as "women's writing" or "feminist poetry", which likewise emerged in the course of a distinct historical development. The temporary and sometimes provisional character of these concepts allows one, in Zhou's opinion, to avoid essentialism:

这三个概念在内涵上相互之间有所偏移而又有交叉、叠合，同时，它们是一定历史时期批评话语的产物，表明了临时性质的而非本质的意义界定。（Ibid.）

As far as the semantics of these three concepts [women's writing, women's poetry and feminist poetry] is concerned, there are some shifts in meaning, but also overlappings and intensifications. At the same time, all three are products of the critical discourse of a specific historical period, and as such, they reveal their provisional non-essentialising character.

In 2007 Zhou Zan formulated a rough definition of women's poetry, which remains the main reference point in this thesis:

我们大致可以这样认为，“女性诗歌”是批评者运用女性主义理论的相关观念和方法，对一些诗歌文本和诗人进行研究的成果。（…）所以，我仍然想再次强调，“女性诗歌”不是标签，不是诗人战队，不是简简单单地为将来的图书馆分类工作助一臂之力。作为一个审察角度，提出它来，是为了寻求这一时期写作的女性诗人和她们的前辈，同代人，

以及其他写作群体之间的关联性。(Zhou 2007: 150, 151-152)

Roughly speaking, we may say that “women’s poetry” is the result of critics applying feminist conceptions and methods to analyse a number of poetic texts and their authors. (...)

Hence, I must stress once more that “women’s poetry” is neither a label, nor is it a line up of poets, nor is it a simple future classification aid for libraries. Seen from the perspective of research, the term has been chosen to explore the connections between women writers of our age, their predecessors, their fellows, and any other groups of writers.

With this statement, Zhou seems to address the anxiety shared by Zhai Yongming and her fellow women poets alike, at being labelled and “taxonomised” as of a special kind only. Furthermore, this definition helps to shift the focus away from commonly acknowledged topics conventionally assigned to women towards a methodological and theoretical perspective. Significantly, it may be applied to all works and poets, regardless of their sex / gender.

As already mentioned, Zhai Yongming has actively shaped the “women’s poetry” discourse since the late 1980s. Since the 1990s her attention has shifted from the lyrical genre to broader issues related to women’s creative force which has manifested itself throughout the ages in art, literature and architecture.

In drafting her own definitions of “women’s poetry”, Zhai responded to the reductive tendencies present in mainstream critical discourse. The poet’s insider perspective on poetry and art has gained in importance and resonance over the years, a fact that is mirrored in her constant self-reflective preoccupation with her own writings. She has rewritten and reedited several of her poetic works and essays, sometimes in response to critique, sometimes aiming at the most accurate expression possible of her developing views.⁴⁰ In 2004 Zhai recounted her essays dedicated to the topic of women’s poetry:

1988 年我在《女性诗歌与诗歌中的女性意识》一文中，反对只强调“女性诗歌”的性别意识，漠视“女性诗歌”发展中的诗歌品质，尤其反对以男性角度，男性概念来解释和强化“女性意识”，好像女诗人除了表明自己身份外没干别的事情。1995 年在拙作《再谈黑夜意识与女性诗歌》中，我也再次谈到“女性诗歌冲破自身束缚而陷入新的束缚”这样一个值得我们警惕的问题，在我看来，“女性诗歌”应该有两个标准：第一是性别意识；第二是艺术品质，这二者加在一起才是女性诗歌的期待目标和理想写作标准。

⁴⁰ The example mentioned by Andrea Lingenfelter in the Introduction to her translation of Zhai Yongming’s poems delivers one more illustration of Zhai’s uneasiness with the critics’ reaction to her early poems resulting in textual changes: “Tellingly, she also revised the final line of ‘Abandoned House’ from ‘I am a woman’ to ‘I am myself’ sometime between its original publication (in 1984) and 1994, when she reprinted it in another collection” (Lingenfelter 2011: xiv).

(Zhai 2007: 34)

In the year 1988, in the essay “‘Women’s Poetry’ and Female Consciousness in Poetry” I opposed the highlighting of sex / gender awareness in “women’s poetry” and the overlooking of the poetic qualities inherent to its development. In particular I protested against the analysis and stressing of a “feminine consciousness” from a masculine perspective and using masculine concepts – as if the only thing women poets did was to express their identity. In 1995, in my flawed work “More Thoughts on ‘Nocturnal Consciousness’ and ‘Women’s Poetry’”, I discussed again the alarming possibility that ‘women poets [might] have exchanged one set of fetters for another’. In my opinion, “women’s poetry” should be judged according to the two following criteria: sex / gender consciousness and artistic quality. Only these two together can set the target and the ideal standards for women’s poetry.

Based on the number of reprints of these three essays (“Women’s Poetry’ and Female Consciousness in Poetry”, “More Thoughts on ‘Black Night Consciousness’ and ‘Women’s Poetry’”, and “Women’s Poetry: Our Wings”) alone, it may be assumed that they still deliver crucial reference points for Zhai’s understanding of women’s poetry as a lyrical and critical project.⁴¹ They can likewise be regarded as questioning and revising the earlier thoughts on female writing that appeared in “Black Night Consciousness”.

In an essay dedicated to several women poets associated with the poetic group Not-Not (非非 *Feifei*),⁴² Zhai indirectly points to another important latent anxiety hidden in the critical discourse about women’s poetry since the 1980s: namely that of the possible junction between lyrical production and feminism (*nüxingzhuyi*, *nüquanzhuyi*). This uneasiness with the feminist label was shared by critics and poets alike. Only many years later did the feminist perspective become important and acceptable for the expression of a distinctive female anger:

那天，一众新老非非女诗人，在白夜商谈成立“女书诗社”的事。小安来前，已喝了几杯酒，在白夜，又喝了几杯，一下激动起来。她再三说要动手写评论女诗人的文章。
(…)她说：“我们就要极端一点儿，就是要提女权二字。她想了一下又说：“我们女诗人自己来写诗评，男诗人从来就没有真正理解过女诗人的作品，我来写，我一定会写得很好。”这也从另一个角度看出，小安并没有象许多男性批评家解读得那样，认为她得写作是超越性别的。(Zhai 2010: 32)

⁴¹ “‘Women’s poetry’ and female consciousness in poetry” was originally written in 1988, first published in *Shikan* in 1989, later reprinted in Zhai 1997; “More thoughts on ‘Black night consciousness’ and ‘Women’s poetry’”, appeared originally in 1995 in *Shi tansuo*, reprinted in 1997, and “Women’s poetry: our wings” from 2004, reprinted in Zhai 2007, 2008, 2010.

⁴² On Not-Not, see Day 2005. Women poets associated with this group are: 小安 Xiao An (b. 1964), Liu Tao, 杨萍 Yang Ping, and 陈小繁 Chen Xiaofan. In 2007 they established an unofficial “Women’s script poetry club” (*Nüshu shishe*) in Zhai Yongming’s club Baiye in Chengdu. Their cooperation aimed at making women’s poetry more visible by means, among others, of theoretical work and the organization of poetry readings. The club was dispersed in the year 2010, their blog delivers an introduction to their activities and may be accessed on <http://blog.sina.com.cn/nvshushishe> (accessed 15/07/2013).

That day, a group of old and new Not-Not women poets were discussing the establishment of a “Women’s script poetry group” in Baiye. Xiao An had already had a few glasses of wine before arriving, and while in Baiye she had a few more. All of a sudden she became excited. Over and over again she said that we should start writing critical articles on female poets ourselves. (...) She said: “We have to become more extreme and promote the two characters ‘女权’ [women’s rights]”. She thought for a while and then continued: “We women poets have to write reviews ourselves, male poets have never truly understood works by women. If I write one, I’m sure that it will be very good”. Seen from a different perspective, this shows that Xiao An, contrary to the way many male critics have seen her, does not regard her poetry as transcending the sex / gender difference.

In the last sentence, Zhai hints at the narrow understanding of women’s poetry prevalent in the late 1980s, which resulted in the establishment of a dogmatic set of lyrical images and syntactic features meant to define “women’s consciousness” and “women’s poetry” alike. Due to the lack of these “typical features”⁴³ the style of many women poets, for example the ones associated with Fei-Fei, was automatically identified as sex / gender indifferent.

Furthermore, even this short anecdote exemplifies in a humorous way the courage required to reject the “taboo” against feminism, interpolated here in the form which is often perceived as the more extreme and controversial one, e.g. *nüquan(zhuyi)* instead of the more ear-pleasing softer *nüxingzhuyi*.⁴⁴

Significantly, Zhai’s writing clearly shows her personal engagement with feminist ideas. Her shifting views on gender-related issues may be described as originating from the emergence of an intense, but contradictory, (激烈又充满矛盾的 *jilie you chongman maodunde*) feminine (sub)consciousness (Zhai 1985, 1998: 68). She first angrily rejected the “feminist icon” label (Zhai, 1989, 1995: 235), which was imposed upon her by critics, nevertheless, later she has been speaking in favour of a distinct and indispensable feminist perspective (Zhai 2003: 10, 2008a: 3-5).

Zhai’s transition from:

⁴³ In the same essay Zhai defines these distinct features as, among others: “Plath-ism” (普拉斯 *Pulasì*), confessional voice (自白派 *zibaipai*), gender resistance (性反抗 *xingfankang*), death consciousness (死亡意识 *siwang yishi*) and the Electra complex (恋父情结 *lianfu qingjie*) (Zhai 2010: 30).

⁴⁴ See also Lingenfelter’s interview with Zhai Yongming:

When most Chinese men hear the term *nüquan zhuyi* [women’s rights feminism] they see red. The term *nüxing zhuyi* 女性主义, feminism with the emphasis on gender, just as the name implies, is less threatening. But the origins, similarities, and differences between these two terms are things nobody cares about. Most people picture feminists as a barbarous horde intent on stripping men of their power. Sexist men may even flatter themselves that these women want to be men. Most Chinese people don’t really understand what *nüxing zhuyi* 女性主义 is in the first place; and they tend to simplistically lump feminists into one big category with powerful, aggressive, or just plain tyrannical and domineering women, with a few shrews and femmes fatales thrown in for good measure. Some people still like to bandy about the phrase, *nüquan zhuyizhe* 女权主义者, as opposed to the more current term, *nüxing zhuyizhe* 女性主义者. This has led the vast majority of women writers and artists who share a feminist consciousness to avoid the word altogether (Zhai & Lingenfelter 2008).

我不是女权主义者，因此才谈到一种可能的“女性”的文学。(Zhai 1995: 235)

It's only because I'm not a feminist [women's rights feminist] that I can speak of a possible kind of "female" literature.

to:

我现在写诗的时候没有可疑地去考虑我的身份是女性，但我的视角一定是女性的。我对我所写得诗得要求是一定要是“好”诗，而不仅仅是女人的诗。可以说，我对女性诗歌有两个观点，或者说是要求吧：一是它一定是女性立场，二是它要有较高的文学品质。(Zhai, Ouyang, et al. 2010: 111)⁴⁵

Now, when I write poetry, I do not concern myself with my identity as a woman, but my point of view is certainly a feminine one. What I want for all my poems is that they should be "good" poems, not only poems written by a woman. You could say that I have two opinions, or maybe two requirements, concerning women's poetry: the first is that it should [represent] a female standpoint, the second is that it should be of comparatively high literary quality.

is understandably and to some extent conditioned by comprehensible external influences, such as her aforementioned collaboration with China's emerging gender-conscious literary criticism. Zhai's understanding of feminism has changed since the 1980s too, following the general shift of interest from feminism commonly understood as *nüquan*, "militant feminism of gender antagonism", to *nüxing*, or the "feminism of sex / gender difference". Today she clearly opposes the idea of purely "genderless" poetry, which claims to remain untouched by the power struggles inherent to current renegotiations of the meaning of gender difference:

(...) 不光诗歌有性别之分，连政治、军事、经济都有性别之分。(Zhai 2010: 263)

(...) not only poems are marked by gender difference, but even politics, military affairs, economics, they all are marked by gender difference.

Another thing that remains of great importance is Zhai's preoccupation with women's art, which is guided by the wish to establish a distinct feminist critique in China, similar to that already existing in the field of poetry:

⁴⁵ This view on poetry matured in the course of Zhai's cooperation with the journal *Wings*. Compare:

我非常赞同戴锦华在与你的访谈[周瓚]众所说的：“女性文学呼唤并要求着两个东西：一是性别立场，一是文学。二者不可或缺，也不能简单地互相替代或等同。”(Zhai & Zhou 2003: 10)

I utterly agree with the opinion Dai Jinhua expressed in your [Zhou Zan] interview: "Women's literature calls for and requires two things: gender positioning and literature. Both are absolutely necessary, they cannot simply replace each other or be equated."

总的来说，中国的女诗人都有比较自觉的女性意识，而在当代艺术里面，因为我一直在这个圈子里，跟一些女艺术家很熟悉(...)我觉得她们的思想很多还停留在 1980 年代以。(…)

在中国当代艺术里面，比如说你可以看到所有的展览里面很少有女艺术家，最多有一两个，也完全是点缀，是花瓶。在评论里更是这样。作为艺术家她们自己不能给自己写评论，她们也不能写她们自己的观念，因为她们毕竟是视觉艺术家，不象诗人可以很好地阐释自己的观念。比如说中国很多女诗人自己也在做评论工作，是吧？周瓚，我，还有蓝蓝，我们都可以写。我们都可以把我们的思想，想法写出来，但是视觉艺术家比较困难，她们一般没有这种能力。而且由于她们在这样的环境里面，也不太敢这样做。

(Zhai & Yang 2012: 260)

By and large, Chinese women poets all have a relatively strong female consciousness, but as far as the contemporary art scene is concerned [this is not the case]. As I have always moved in those circles and am close friends with some female artists. (...) I think that in the main their ideas have stayed behind in the pre-1980s (...).

In exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art, for example, you will hardly see any female artists, or at the most one or two, and they're there only for show – pretty frames, as it were. In the field of art criticism it is even worse. As artists they can't themselves write their own reviews or express their concepts in writing. After all, they're visual artists. They're not like poets, who can easily expound their ideas. For example, lots of female poets in China write reviews, don't they? Zhou Zan, me, or Lan Lan. We can all write. We can all express our ideas and opinions in writing. But for visual artists it's difficult, in general they don't have that kind of ability. Moreover, in the present state of affairs, they don't really dare.

In addition, Zhai's growing acceptance of the feminist standpoint corresponds with her socially critical position, which leads her to state her concern at the backlash tendencies arising in contemporary China:

我觉得现在最大的问题，就是中国随着经济地位的提高，在世界上变得越来越重要，中国人的文化复兴的愿望就提升了。很多人开始关注民族的文化复兴，但是伴随着文化复兴的愿望，我觉得也有一些特别糟糕的现象。比如，在复兴的中国传统文化里面，精华和糟粕都泛滥起来。过去已经被批判的或者被唾弃的封建东西又回头了。在中国，女性的地位正慢慢地，不太被别人察觉地后退。(Ibid.: 259)

In my view, the biggest problem at the moment is that with China's rising economic status and growing global importance the Chinese people's desire for cultural revitalisation has been stimulated. Many people have become interested in the revival of a national culture, but the desire for a cultural renaissance is also, I think, accompanied by the emergence of some really bad phenomena. For example, in the course of the revival of Chinese tradition, both the cream and the dregs have surfaced and spread. Long ago repudiated and rejected feudalistic things have turned up again. In China, the status of women is deteriorating, gradually and almost unnoticed.

This quotation shows that Zhai does not confine herself to the field of poetry and art, but for many years has remained increasingly active and raised her voice to comment on social

issues.⁴⁶

Since 2000, Zhai has further developed her views on the crucial features of the female standpoint in poetry. After replacing in her writings the initial “black night consciousness” with the notion of a distinct “female consciousness” and “female perspective”, she has recently turned her attention to a different concept, namely that of the female voice (雌声 *cisheng*). It may be assumed that this new category entered her writing in the course of her long-standing investigation into traditional poetry and life-stories of women from Imperial China. Since the 1990s, she has traced and revealed signs of a distinctive female perspective in Chinese history and culture, which had been obscured by the grand tradition of canonical, i.e. predominantly masculine, narration. The necessity of investigating the category of the “female voice”, a typical prompt in traditional poetics, may originate in Zhai’s observation that China has up to now lacked a true feminine tradition in poetry. Furthermore, Zhai has called other terms designating femininity into question as being already politicised and, in consequence, overdetermined:

(…) 在中国，“妇女”和“女性”这两个称谓是带有政治色彩的，“妇女”一词是与无产阶级革命联系在一起的，而“女性”则是“五四”新文化运动接受西方女性主义话语后引进地，在“文革”后再度恢复使用，正是对长期以来抹杀性别差异的一种反抗。(Zhai 2004)

(...) In China, “funü” [“the female subject in Maoist state discourse” (Barlow 1994: 339)] and “nǚxing” [“woman the sexed subject, the other of humanist Man, essential woman” (Ibid.)], are both politically coloured. The word “funü” is linked to the proletarian revolution, and “nǚxing” entered China in the wake of the New Culture Movement’s affiliation with Western feminist discourse. It came into usage again, after the Cultural Revolution, as a rebellion against the long-lasting obliteration of gender difference.

Zhai’s demand for a new terminology was additionally substantiated by the already mentioned majority of feminist critics’ understanding of post-1980s women’s poetry as a historically embedded phenomenon. Of no less importance was the rampant misuse of the term “women’s poetry” by mainstream critics:

(…) 多情况下，一提到女性文学、女性意识，许多男性立即陷入一种集体无意识，想当然地“概念化”和“妖魔化”或“政治化”女性诗歌，这也成为女诗人拒绝贴上“女性诗歌”这个标签的原因所在。由此女性诗歌受到双重歧视：来自男性和女性自身。(Zhai 2010: 266)

⁴⁶ This has resulted in Zhai’s increasing online presence. Apart from her personal poetry blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/zhaiyongming>), she also runs the online platform of her bar Baiye (<http://baiye98.com>), and posts comments on current affairs on the popular microblog platform Sina Weibo (<http://weibo.com/zhaiyongming>).

(...) Very often, at the very mention of women's literature or female consciousness, a lot of men immediately fall into a kind of collective unconsciousness. They "conceptualise", and "demonise", or "politicise" women's poetry as a matter of course – which is also one of the reasons why women poets reject the label "women's poetry". Hence, women's poetry falls victim to twofold discrimination, from men and from women themselves.

Zhai's strategy of reintroducing the traditional term "female voice" to contemporary poetry matches Cixous' call to "steal into language to make it fly" (Cixous 1976: 887).⁴⁷ Zhai consciously reclaims ("steals") and subversively overwrites this traditional poetical concept, which had been used in the past to criticise and evaluate poetry by women in Imperial China. Zhai attempted to define the "female voice" for the first time in a discussion with two Japanese female poets⁴⁸ which was held in 2005. In this conversation, dedicated to women's poetry, she referred to Li Qingzhao's 李清照 (1084-1155) *jueju* (short quatrain poem) 乌江 "Wujiang"⁴⁹ to exemplify her understanding of *cisheng*. She carefully parallels the "female voice" with an aesthetics of the defeated (败者的美学 *baizhe de meixue*):

比如李清照 (...) 这首诗，表面看起来诗中是一种非常男性化的声音，用词、语调都很雄健，但是我觉得它里面就有“雌声”。因为男性基本是以成败来论英雄的，但是，李清照以一种女性眼光来关照历史事件时，就并不以成败为然了。这种女性看待成败的视角，我认为就是有女性意识的。也就是这首诗表面上是“雄声”，但它底层的基础声音是“雌声”。

(Zhai, Ouyang, et al. 2010: 114)

Take for example this poem by Li Qingzhao. On the surface, it gives the impression of an extremely masculinised voice, the words and the tone are both very powerful. In my opinion, however, at a deeper level there is a "female voice". For men generally tend to measure heroes by their success or failure. But Li Qingzhao observes historical events from a feminine perspective, which means not on the evidence of success or failure. I think that this feminine

⁴⁷ Jeanne Hong Zhang dedicated the last chapter of her monograph *The Invention of a Discourse* to the image of flying in women's poetry from the 1980s and 1990s. She discusses in detail the flying creatures, canonical ones like swallows and novel ones like bats, which emerged in large numbers in the early poetry of Zhai Yongming, Hai Nan, and others. Zhang interprets these images as follows: "Contemporary Chinese women poets identify with flying creatures, and recognise both their elevated state of being and their inner vulnerability. [...] Being a writing women means to take flight within and via words, during which new perspectives and new experiences may emerge. This flight of imagination brings about a sense of freedom and empowerment. The second strategy is a self-depreciative identification with conventionally antiheroic, unpopular creatures, e.g. bats and crows." (Zhang 2004: 191). I agree with Zhang's close reading and instead of repeating her argument in the main text I refer the reader to the aforementioned (see Chapter 2) political dimension of *écriture féminine* and its flying imaginary.

⁴⁸ 财部鸟子 (Takarabe Toriko たからべ とりこ, b.1933) and 平田俊子 (Hirata Toshiko ひらた としこ, b. 1955).

⁴⁹ "In life one should be a hero among men/ Then in death a stalwart among ghosts./To this day everyone remembers XiangYu./ Who refused to cross to south of the Yangzi." (Translated in Idema & Grant 2004: 241).

approach to success and failure is inherent to the feminine consciousness. In other words, although the surface voice of the poem is masculine, it is underwritten by a deeper grounding voice, which is a female one.

Since then, Zhai has focused on the ambiguous and often misunderstood features of the “female voice”. In an essay from 2008, she identified the departure point of her conceptual “flight” in the former critical reception of Xue Tao’s 薛涛 (758-831) poetry:

胡震亨⁵⁰曾这样评价薛涛的诗说：“薛工绝句，无雌声”，也就是说：

薛涛的诗没有女子气，是好诗。在中国古代各家评注中，涉及到对女诗人的评价中，总会有这样的标准。有无“雌声”，是古代文学史对女诗人的褒贬用词。“无雌声”一直是对薛涛诗歌的高度赞扬。(Zhai 2010: 264)

Hu Zhenxiang evaluated Xue Tao’s poems as follows: “In the jueju crafted by Xue, [there is] no female voice”. To say it in a different way: Xue Tao’s poetry has no feminine aura, so it is good poetry. It is the criterion to be found in all the ancient Chinese commentaries relating to the assessment of women poets. Having or not having a female voice are the terms used in ancient history of literature to pass judgement on women’s poetry. “No female voice” is always the highest praise for Xue Tao’s poetry.

In this essay, Zhai discusses poems by the Tang dynasty female poets Xue Tao and Yu Xuanji 鱼玄机 (844-869), and she repeats her Li Qingzhao-based argument mentioned above. She quotes male critics to show how their appraisals of the true female voice in poetry resulted in its silencing or marginalization throughout the ages, by men and women alike. Zhai shows how the cliché-ridden critical discourse of soft and gentle poetry hidden in the female quarters led to the establishment of the masculine voice as the standard in poetry. The feminine, on the other hand, became standardised and idealised into a prop, a position to be taken, or a mask to be worn:

只是，在女性缺席的年代，“委婉派”就成为男性代替女性声音一种表达，或者说：有男性发出的“雌声”充满了男性的自恋和对女性的想想。(Zhai 2010: 266)

But, in times of women’s absence [from society], “*weiwanpai*” [the soft and feminine style] was adopted as a masculine substitute for the expression of the female voice. We may say, the “female voice”, produced by men, was permeated by male narcissism and male fantasies of the feminine.

Unlike in the 1980s when, tired of the popularity of “women’s poetry”, Zhai strongly distanced herself from a gender-biased perspective on literature, she now acknowledges that

⁵⁰ Hu Zhenxiang (1569-1645), literatus, official, and poetry collector from the Ming dynasty. See Zhang Jian 2011: 82-89.

genderless poetry, appraised for its neutral merits, does not really exist. She calls for an exploration of the “female voice” in traditional and modern poetry. According to Zhai, this gender bound poetics emerged in the Chinese poetic tradition centuries before “women’s poetry” of the 1980s was recognised as pioneering in expressing “feminine consciousness”. She finally delineates her understanding of the “female voice” as an aesthetics, and a method of composing women’s poetry that is grounded in female perspective and female experience:

在我看来，雌声 ——也就是女性诗歌必须发出自己的、女性的声音。女性诗歌不是生理写作，并不需要百分之百的女性化。它是一种方法论，它为女诗人提供了一个新的角度、新的视点：一种不同于男性的思维方式。也就是说：女性的声音，是一个单独的、独立于既有审美体系的诗歌标准。它既不是一种竞雄的方式，更不是男性语言的复制、填空和补充。(Zhai 2010: 267)

In my opinion, the female voice – women’s own voice – is what women’s poetry must express. Women’s poetry is not writing grounded in biology, neither does it need to be entirely feminised. It is a kind of methodology, it supplies women with a new perspective, a new viewpoint: a way of thinking unlike that of men. In other words, it is a unique poetic standard independent of existing aesthetical systems. It is not a means of competing with masculinity, even less does it duplicate or supplement the male voice.

By bringing the revised notion of female voice into the discussion, Zhai successfully “flies away” from the already existing and overinvested categories of feminism (*nüquanzhuyi*, *nüxingzhuyi*) and women’s poetry. With the reintroduction of this analytical category she opens a discursive field in which not only Western influences may be rethought but, simultaneously, in which the Chinese poetic heritage has to be questioned. In this context, *cisheng* may be regarded as an already *postfeminist* notion of reflection from within the already existing, but overdetermined and questionable feminist perspective (see Introduction). Significantly, Zhai provokes not only by reinterpreting and overwriting a traditional poetic category, but also by choosing a notion that excites with its sheer biological origins and connotations (pointing to animals of female sex). It not only exceeds the radical *nüquan*-statement Fei-Fei poetesses made, but, moreover, it concomitantly negates the possibility of a reintroduction of a term from modern history. These various hints at an ongoing radicalisation of the feminist and (as exemplified in the following part of this chapter) poetic language may be seen as a reaction to and critique of the subject positionalities available to women in the globalised post-socialist world.

In search of the female voice: Zhai Yongming's "most delicate words"

Revisiting history

In her collection of poems and essays *Most Delicate Words* (2008) Zhai remains captivated by literary tradition and women's creativity throughout the ages, a topic she has been exploring since the 1990s. The title of the book hints ironically at the poet's revisiting and questioning of convention-ridden modes of voicing the feminine in traditional poetry. These are standardly associated with a literary sensitivity that has been popularly described as 委婉 *weiwan* or 委婉 *weiyao*, meaning as much as tactful, delicate and soft or euphemistic. In this collection Zhai engages in a recontextualisation of themes from classical poetry such as love, feminine-voiced complaints of mistreatment and abandonment,⁵¹ nostalgia or landscape painting. Zhai unfolds her reinterpretations of these popular motifs on her own unique poetic terms whereby she explores the possibilities and limits of contemporary re- and overwriting of literary tradition. Due to the fact that the poems were written concurrently with her above-mentioned attempts to conceptualise the *cisheng*, this collection will be discussed below as a poetical playground for the expression of the female voice.

In the long poem "Yu Xuanji fu" 鱼玄机赋 (Rhapsody on Yu Xuanji, written in 2005) many of the prominent traits of Zhai Yongming's recent artistic engagement appear clearly. The poem's title prompts a reexamination of the heritage of the golden era of Tang (618–907) poetry. Yu Xuanji (c. 844 – c. 871) was one of the most famous women poets in Chinese history. She nevertheless failed to enact properly either of the two roles available in traditional society to women from the lower social strata who remained outside the marital bond: that of a concubine or that of a Daoist nun. She was executed at the age of (approximately) twenty-five, after she had been found guilty of murdering her servant girl, Lüqiao 绿翘. This drama of jealousy has remained the most popular narrative of Yu Xuanji's life.

The poem by Zhai delivers a suitable illustration of the tendency in her writing which Andrea Lingenfelter (2011: xvi) called "revisionist historicism". It is characterised by the effort to read against the grain the life stories of women recorded in Confucian narratives. Simultaneously, the poet engages in a vivid and playful exchange with literary conventions,

⁵¹ These topics may be regarded as belonging to the standard genre of expressing feminine grief, *guiyuan* 闺怨, or "boudoir complaints". From the Liang dynasty (502–557) on, this mode of writing was popular among male literati poets, who incorporated a melancholic female persona into their poetry. See Samei 2004: 2.

constructing a poem out of prosaic, dramatic and lyrical elements and filling it with rich intertextual allusions.

Zhai's choice to dedicate a *fu* to Yu Xuanji is significant. First of all, it breaks with the strict generic boundaries of prose and poetry, and foregrounds a more heterogeneous approach to lyrical texts. Commonly, Zhai's poems are accompanied by essays dedicated to the same topic, which often embed the lyrical in concrete happenings with a supplementary, but not indispensable commentary. These interrelated pieces of writing shed light on different aspects of the story, the reader is following the narrating voice which oscillates freely between poetry and prose and, in consequence, blurs the boundaries between distinct works. This matches Zhai's understanding of a literary text of any genre as a comprehensive art work (*zonghe yishu* 综合艺术)⁵², an approach towards writing which emerged as a result of her collaboration with installation artist:

I realized (...) that all of my work is “women's art” 女性艺术. There's only one difference between my installations and my work in print: the expectations of the viewer's gaze, expectations that the installation itself alters. (Lingenfelter & Zhai 2008)

Consequently, what Zhai had originally conceptualised as an essay on Yu Xuanji's life eventually appeared in print as a “rhapsody”, a form usually inspired by historical or legendary drama. *Fu* remains one of the oldest genres in Chinese literature, one that generously leaves space for vivid descriptions of landscapes, objects and happenings, and is often rich in allusions and quotations. There was nothing exceptional in dedicating a rhapsody to a historical figure or a goddess, but Yu Xuanji as a concubine and murderer was not a proper addressee for this genre. In imperial China, *fu* entered the range of text types that had to be mastered in order to pass the civil service examinations. Composing poems on an assigned topic was one of the tasks to be completed.

Zhai's poem does not follow any fixed sentence pattern; it is composed in free verses of varying length and five sections varying in style. While discussing her predecessor, Zhai slips into the role of an investigator reexamining the murder case from a contemporary perspective. Despite a laconic and factual mode of expression, she weaves a lyrical text laden with allusions to Yu Xuanji's poetry and her life story as described by Huangfu Mei 黄甫枚 in his 三水小牘 *Sanshui xiaodu* (Short notes from Sanshui, early tenth century).

⁵² Personal interview (Beijing, 2010).

In this collection of anecdotes, Huangfu Mei included a lively dialogue between the Tang poet and her servant, an exchange that then entered the cultural memory as evidence proving the occurrence of the drama of jealousy and its fatal end. Zhai foregrounds the fact that even minor, unofficial history was authored by men, and that it was especially the lives of women from the bottom of society or of those existing outside clan bonds that most often served as a seductive projection surface for anecdotes and fantasies. Now she takes the opportunity to overwrite the fabulations of Huangfu and others. In the third section of the long poem, Zhai reinvents the dialogue between Xuanji and Lǔqiao's ghost as an opera duet performed to the popular melody of "Yan'er luo" 雁儿落 (Wild geese have come down). In this musical exchange, Lǔqiao, the former servant, may be regarded as the leading and the modern voice. She becomes the one who encourages Yu Xuanji to transgress the limits imposed on her by society instead of isolating herself in the monastery. Lǔqiao shows no understanding for Xuanji's longing for male attributes, such as chess or writing utensils, for they are assigned to the literati class and are objects of leisure. Instead, she urges her to break out, as if she wanted to save her from fulfilling her fate as a murderer. The assumed crime was the direct result of Yu Xuanji's dependency on male patrons and, at the same time, of the unavailability to her of alternative life choices in the traditional society.

The ghostly intervention remains simply a projection of an imaginative but impossible escape. The following section of the poem bears the title "Yu Xuanji de Muzhiming" 鱼玄机的墓志铭 (Epitaph for Yu Xuanji). Here Zhai Yongming lists the "crimes" the Tang poetess was guilty of:

写诗 作画 多情

Writing poetry painting tender and affectionate

她没有赢得风流薄幸名

She never earned the reputation of a bonvivante

却吃了冤枉官司

rather had to swallow unjust treatment by the law

(...)

美女身份遮住了她的才华盖世

Her beauty obfuscated her artistic talents⁵³

(Zhai 2008b: 79)

⁵³ Unless otherwise noted, all poems translated from Chinese by Helen Wallimann and Justyna Jaguścik.

With these verses Zhai hints at the fact that Yu Xuanji was doubly punished. Firstly, by her contemporaries, for not compromising with the expectations corresponding to the traditional gender roles. Secondly, by later generations who, by retelling the story of the alleged crime by an amorous nun, gradually obliterated her identity as an outstanding poet. In one of her essays, Zhai combines these observations with a critique of contemporary readership:

(…) 更有许多评论，将鱼玄机与当下中国文学现实中的美女作家、身体写作混为一体。
(Zhai 2010b: 252)

(...) furthermore there are many reviews that lump Yu Xuanji together with the “beauty writers” and “body writing” of contemporary Chinese literature.

However, Zhai is conscious of the fact that her own reading of Yu Xuanji will remain nothing but another fabulation or, in her own words, “an improvisation of the typing hand” (键盘手的即兴弹奏 *jianpanshou de jixing tanzou*).

In the opening section of the poem titled 一条鱼和一条鱼的玄机无人知道 “Yi tiao yu he ling yi tiao yu de xuanji wu ren zhidao” (No one knows the profound secrets of one fish or another fish) Zhai briefly recalls what is actually known about Yu Xuanji’s life:

鱼玄机 身穿道袍 诗文候教⁵⁴

Yu Xuanji clothed in a Daoist robe awaits your literary instruction

十二著文章 十六为人妾⁵⁵

At the age of twelve she authored essays at sixteen she became a concubine

二十入道观 二十五

at twenty she entered a Taoist temple at twenty-five

她毙命于黄泉

she met a violent end at the Yellow Springs

(Zhai 2008b: 74)

Zhai weaves numerous allusions and quotations from Yu Xuanji’s works into this part of her poem. The very first image she introduces to the reader is that of Xuanji confined in a cangue (身穿枷衣 *shenchuan jiayi*) on her way to the execution site. Zhai describes the yoke as

⁵⁴ This is an allusion to a note which, according to later authors, Yu Xuanji left at the entrance to her Daoist convent. This call for literary instruction indirectly points to the fact that, after becoming a nun, she maintained contacts with many literary men.

⁵⁵ Yu Xuanji became the concubine of the censor Li Yi 李亿, who however later abandoned her. Afterwards, she decided to enter a Daoist nunnery. See Chang & Saussy 1999: 66-67, Idema & Grant 2004: 189.

another type of female “attire” to be “worn”, thereby hinting at the following verse from Yu Xuanji’s poem:

自恨罗衣掩诗句 (...)⁵⁶

I resent these gauze robes of mine which conceal poems’ lines (...)
(translated in Chang & Saussy 1999: 75).

Zhai associates the feminine garments with yokes, as they both restrain women’s physical motility and social mobility in an analogical way. Yu’s ambition as expressed in the aforementioned poem was to ascend socially on the basis of her intellectual and literary merits. She noticed that her sex was the only obstacle in reaching out for the “silver hooks” (银钩 *yingou*)⁵⁷ granted in the imperial examination. Zhai interprets Yu Xuanji’s lament as one stating not only an individual destiny but also the collective lot of many anonymous women in traditional China. They have remained hidden in oblivion and for this reason:

一条鱼和另一条鱼

One fish and another fish

她们之间的玄机

the profound secrets between women

就这样 无人知道

just like that nobody knows

(Zhai 2008b: 76)

Zhai’s ending of the first section of the poem suggests more than one possible reading of the character 鱼 *yu*. In the first place, it hints directly at the Tang poetess and her servant girl, in whose name the second character 翘 *qiao* is sometimes used to name a kind of fish. Secondly, it may play the role of a metonymy in which the surname Yu (“Fish”) points to silenced women in general. In consequence, the second and third line are open to two possible readings and renditions: “the secrets between the women will never be known” or “the truth about Xuanji”.

Scenes including fish and fishermen belong to one of the common images in Yu Xuanji’s

⁵⁶ All quotations from Yu Xuanji’s poems originate from Lin, Li & Ni 1998: 3083-3086.

⁵⁷ Silver hooks represent the writing of the successful candidates.

poetry. Zhai integrates the following verses taken from 赋得江边柳 “Fude jiangbian liu” (On the assigned topic of willows by the river) into her poem:

(...) 花落钩人头。 根老藏鱼窟 (...)
 (...) their floss falls down upon the angler's head.
 Their old roots conceal the holes where fishes hide (...)
 (Idema & Grant 2004: 194)

These lines, which reveal a sense of sadness over the falling flowers and decaying roots of the trees, in Zhai's interpretation turn into a prefiguration of the death that awaits those hiding from the fisherman's hand:

鲜花钩住了她的人头 (...)
 Fresh flowers have stayed hooked in her head
 根老了 鱼群藏匿至它的洞窟 (...)
 The roots have grown old Shoals of fish hide in their holes
 手指如钩 搅乱了老树的倒影 (...)
 Fingers like hooks disturb the reflections of the old trees
 鱼玄机着白衣
 Yu Xuanji in white clothing
 绿翘穿红衣
 Lùqiao wearing red clothes
 手起刀落 她们的鱼鳞
 The hand rises, the knife falls their fish scales
 褪下来 成为漫天大雪
 peeled off turn into whirling snowflakes
 (Zhai 2008b: 75)

In the last section of the poem Zhai recalls the title of Yu Xuanji's work literally in a short characterisation of her heroine:

她赋得江边柳 却赋不得男人心
 She rhymes with willows by the river but does not rhyme with menfolk's hearts
 (Zhai 2008b: 80)

This “not rhyming” with men's will and contravening of the rules of patriarchal society are

major topics in the essays Zhai dedicated to Yu Xuanji. She recognises in Yu the female poet consumed by the wish to ascend in the social hierarchy according to her literary talent. At some stages of her life, Yu tried to live the life of a male literati poet and, according to Zhai, was severely punished for this transgression:

“像男人一样写作”（将写作变成自己的职业，志趣中还贯穿文学野心），就更是一种对礼教、对社会的僭越；而“诗文候教”，与男诗人交流、唱和、即兴赋诗？(Zhai 2010b: 253)

“Writing like a man” (turning writing into one’s profession and having, in addition, aspirations permeated by literary ambition) is an even greater violation of the [Confucian] rules of etiquette and society. And [what about] “awaiting literary instructions”, socializing with male poets, exchanging and improvising poems [with them]?

Significantly, the poem in which Zhai thematises Yu’s untimely ambitions is filled with images of descending, sinking objects and of ascending movements blocked. They mirror the fact that Yu, in spite of her strong longing for acknowledgment, was immobilised by the rules of the traditional society which eventually turned her into the figure of a “fallen woman / flower”⁵⁸. Her life story has a representative value:

很多古代女人身穿枷衣

Cangues were many ancient women’s attire

飘满天空 串起来

Fluttering all over the sky strung together

可以成为白色风筝 她们升不上天

they could turn into white kites but could not rise up to the heavens

(Zhai 2008b: 74)

Zhai’s revision of Tang poetry shows that, even in those glorious literary times, attempts to ascend to the lyrical hall of fame carried with them certain risks as far as women were concerned. This may be seen as a valuable comment on the fact that only few women poets figure within the rich body of Tang poetry. Almost without exception, they fall under one or other of the two categories of “out-of-place” bodies: courtesans or nuns.

According to Zhai, especially the first of these two professions determined the removal famous poets’ from the public space. In an essay included in *Most Delicate Words* and devoted to the famous Tang poet Xue Tao 薛涛 (768 – c. 832), Zhai points to the present-day

⁵⁸ “Fallen flower” was a common metaphor used to refer to a courtesans or prostitutes.

implications of the poet's troublesome social status. In her hometown of Chengdu, where she spent most of her life, Xue Tao does not currently enjoy an equivalent status to that of the famous Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), who only lived in Chengdu for four years:

现今成都都正在打造诗歌之城的“文化名片”，在杜甫草堂斥资修建诗歌大道，却并不见将成都另一诗歌遗址薛涛纪念馆炒作一下。(…)可见即便是时代进步至 21 世纪，在对男女诗人的待遇上，以阶级划分的势利眼也并不少。薛涛生前与成都历届最高地官方(…)都有诗文往来，这些当权者都非常看重她，而现在的地方官员显然不如古代官僚那样重文重才，又或因某些意识形态作怪，因此才对薛涛旧址乃至望江公园不够重视。

(Zhai 2008b: 140)

These days, Chengdu wants to forge a name as the city of poetry. The city has furnished funds for the creation of a poetry avenue close to Du Fu's Thatched Cottage, but at the same time sees no need to popularise another historic poetry site: Xue Tao's Memorial. (...) Evidently, even in the 21st century, the treatment of women and men poets is not free from class snobbery. During her lifetime Xue Tao enjoyed literary friendship with the city's highest officials (...), and the men in power all treated her with respect. But these days local officials seem not to care as much about literature and talent as the ancient bureaucrats did. Or maybe there are ideological reasons that prevent them from attaching sufficient importance to Xue Tao's former residence or even to the Riverview Park [in which the residence is located].

In conclusion, Zhai foregrounds that to date the question of feminine virtue has remained intact as a criterion for the evaluation of women's art:

这几乎就是所有千百年来有“历史污点”的中国女诗人、女画家的共同待遇：由于“生活作风问题”，她们连人带作品都被轻视、被遮蔽、被弱化、被消解了。

(Ibid.)

This has, throughout history, been the common reception of almost all Chinese women poets and painters with a “historical stain”. Due to their “improper lifestyle”, their works have always been underrated, obscured, diminished, expunged.

It can be seen from this that in her *Most Delicate Words* Zhai not only questions the conventional narratives of history and tradition, but also inquires critically into contemporary ones. In the cycle of three poems that closes the lyrical part of the collection, titled “Zai chuntian xiangnian chuantong” 在春天想念传统 (Spring longing for tradition), she thematises the lyrical resonance of poetry and landscape, or landscape painting, which is deeply embedded in the Chinese literati culture. With these closing lyrical verses Zhai rises a significant question: what happens to traditional lyrical modes of expression when the natural environment they resonated with falls prey to devastation?

The opening stanza of the first poem brims with nostalgia for the authentic beauty of the landscape that inspired the traditional paintings:

在春天，当一树假花开放至酡颜

In spring, when artificial blossoms bloom in drunken colours

我想念传统 那些真的山

I miss those traditional real mountains

真的水 真的花鸟和工笔

real waters real flowers and birds and gongbi

那些使少女脸色美丽的颜色

Those young girls' charming complexions

来自于植物 那些美

with make-up from plants that beauty

得于气

gained from the air

(Zhai 2008b: 108)

All “that beauty” could be properly represented using realistic techniques of traditional Chinese painting, such as *gongbi*. In contrast, the contemporary painter-poet is forced to resort to different means to depict the desolate and dreary landscapes:

怀着去不掉的古意

cherishing the everlasting spirit of antiquity

我用笔：断笔、干笔

I use a brush: a broken brush [i.e. I quit painting], a dry brush [a technique of brushwork with minimal amounts of water]

破笔、枯笔

a worn-out brush [a technique of brushwork used in landscape painting of mountains and waters], a bare brush [a technique of painting with dense ink]

(Zhai 2008b: 108)

In this stanza the poet points to three distinct techniques of brushwork used in traditional painting and calligraphy. Actually, these artistic technical terms all include adjectives which, when standing separately, in their basic meaning refer to a certain degree of destruction and desolation: *gan* (dry), *po* (broken, worn-out) and *ku* (withered). The opening stanza of the second poem in this series may be read in direct opposition to the first poem (quoted above), thus contrasting ancient and contemporary landscapes:

在秃山秃水中喝茶

Drinking tea amongst bald mountains and dead waters

用手指 不是用秃笔

I use my finger not my bald writing brush

高速公路杀进了初春

The expressway has killed the early spring

杀尽了十几十座森林

slaughtered acres of forest

是杀风景 不是煞风景

it is massacring the landscape not spoiling the fun

(Ibid.: 110)

Here, the poet decides to put aside the brush and eventually remains pointing with her finger at the scenery transformed into an execution ground for nature. The last verse in this stanza not only includes word play based on the homonymy of the two different characters which are identically pronounced “sha” (both meaning “to kill”, but the second one is here introduced in an idiomatic fixed expression meaning “spoil the fun”). It is, as well, an intertextual allusion to the late Tang poet Li Shangyin’s 李商隐 (813–858) work titled 杂纂 *Za zuan* (Randomly compiled). Li’s poetry, the greater part of which touches on social issues, remains original due to its dense and cryptic imagery. His initial interest in conventional rustic scenes developed into the search for a peaceful mind through the description of nature. In *Za zuan* he listed, in the form of two-part allegorical sentences, several ways of “spoiling the fun” (煞风景 *sha fengjing*). These were, among others, the following:

花上晒裯 *hua shang shai kun*

“sun-drying garments on flowers”,

背山起楼 *bei shan qi lou*

“building a house that backs onto a mountain”,

松下喝道⁵⁹ *song xia he dao*

“invading the pine trees to drink loudly underneath”.

The word play of homonymous verbs in Zhai’s poem foregrounds the difference between the purely aesthetical consideration of landscape in antiquity and the contemporary scenes of destruction in which the question of nature becomes one of its pure survival. Li’s notion of “spoiling the fun” represents a gentleman’s anxiety at violating the rules of good taste, but simultaneously it foregrounds the fact that it is man’s task to adjust his behaviour to the

⁵⁹ For more examples see Li Shangyin 义山杂纂 *Yi Shan Za Zuan* (Randomly compiled by Yi Shan).

environment. Nature's noble beauty must not be invaded or intruded on by man. Zhai depicts a scene in which this principle has been abandoned.

Furthermore, she touches on other features associated with traditional landscape painting, namely its spiritual qualities. The natural world implied freedom from social constraints and worldly matters. Realistic modes of representing the natural world coexisted with those which rather promoted self expression of the artist, whose works were supposed to mirror his state of mind. In her poem series Zhai establishes an analogy between the materiality of the landscape and the perceiving mind:

被砍伐的树林
The felled forest
放倒如同一个虚无之人
falls like an empty person
秃了一大片山
After a large part of the mountain had become barren
也秃了一颗望山的心
the mind looking at the mountain became barren too
(Ibid.)

In the last poem of the series the perceiving mind finally turns to landscape painting which, as in ancient times, becomes the vehicle of meditation. Not the natural environment but its representation on a scroll depicting mountains engenders a withdrawal from the contemporary into the inner world. The ancient opposition between nature and worldly matters is replaced by the one between the individual mind and the urban environment:

更多的时候 观察自己的眉心
more often contemplating one's own forehead
胜过观察远方的城市
is better than contemplating the distant city
(Ibid.: 111)

In the end of this poem the observing mind turns to itself, as it has no other place of escape. Whilst the natural beauty of mountains, their fauna and flora changing according to the rhythm of the four seasons, belong to the elementary conventional imagery of traditional poetry, currently the devastated landscape can only with difficulty be sublimated through

artistic means of expression, which consequently seem outdated and irrelevant. Traditionally, nature functioned as a place of seclusion and provided shelter for those willing to withdraw from daily matters and politics; today, however, spaces and means of escape from the changed environment must be defined anew.

Texts collected in *Most Delicate Words* clearly show that revisionist historicism is one of the basic features of Zhai's female voice. Significantly, this inquiry into antiquity is not confined to an archeology of her-stories that need simply to be added to the mainly masculine, conventional narrative of the past. Zhai approaches tradition from the contemporary perspective, her reevaluation oscillating constantly between the past and the present. Her female voice does not confine itself to expressing the silenced feminine: it has already transgressed issues which were crucial in women's poetry in the 1980s. It is, more generally, a voice of critique of the available modes of expression and their inadequacy for the here and now.

Changing body matters

Jeanne Hong Zhang in her *The Invention of the Discourse* distinguishes between two major orientations in women's poetry of the 1980s and 1990s: "body poetics" and "language poetics" (Zhang 2004: 74). In her opinion, the latter replaced the former after the initially popular "confessional" mode of expression gave way to a more narrative or dramatic one. The "linguistic turn" in women's poetry of the 1990s was similarly observed by Zhou Zan in her article "Jianping Zhai Yongming shige xiezu de sange jieduan" 简评翟永明诗歌写作的三个阶段 (A brief review of the three stages in Zhai Yongming's writing, 2002).

I agree with Zhang Hong's observation, that the "writing of the female body by Chinese women poets sends out a strong message against political and discursive restraints" (Zhang 2004: 64). With this opinion she tunes in with conclusions on post-Mao "somatography" voiced by literary critics Ge Hongbing, Xie Youshun and Nan Fan (see Chapter 2). The shift in poetic language and imagery has not, however, resulted in an abandonment of the body. I argue that in Zhai's recent writing a novel corporeal poetics is recognisable, one that highlights the materiality of the lived body and no longer lingers in sexual difference and the feminine experience *per se*.

These two different approaches to the body and, consequently, to corporeal poetics may be traced by bringing up the example of two poems by Zhai, identically titled "Shenti" 身体 (Body / Bodies). The earlier one is a longer poem, composed of five sections, which was most

probably written in the early 1990s and published in 1997. The second one comprises four irregular stanzas and is included in her *Most Delicate Words*.

In the earlier “Body” all the main features of women’s poetry, as identified by Zhang in her publication, may be observed. For instance, images of motherhood, ageing, darkness, and death of the female body emerge in this long poem. The poet points to the body as a source of ephemeral pleasure and happiness, and at the same time as a tentative receptacle for the soul. Flesh is doomed to rot and be transformed into dust, but here and now it should nevertheless be celebrated for its flourishing beauty:

身体使人愉快
 The body makes people happy
 虽然内部是黑暗的 虽然
 Although its interior is dark although
 尘土 腐烂
 dust and rot
 触及一个血肉之身
 touch bodies of flesh and blood
 (...)
 我们美丽的身体
 Our beautiful bodies,
 何时吐蕊? 何时飘落?
 when will they flower? When will they fade?
 灵魂末端的花朵在哭泣
 The bloom at the soul’s tip is weeping
 衰老飘忽不定的走来
 Decrepitude approaches fitfully
 像镜子考验我的耐心
 Like a mirror testing my patience⁶⁰
 (Zhai 1997: 36, 37)

The body in Zhai’s poem appeals to the senses like a charming flower, it must be appreciated for its beauty, scent and ephemerality. The outer layer of skin separates the visible bright and moist surface of the body from the dark and unavoidably rotting flesh within. In its dual

⁶⁰ The fourth section of the poem was translated by Lingenfelter (Lingenfelter 2011: 39). Translation amended by Helen Wallimann.

nature, the body is inevitably involved in the perpetual chain of transformation from birth to death and rebirth. Death is a scary supplement and a lingering potentiality hidden inside the fragrant body:

在我们丰富的身上
 In our rich and fertile bodies
 有一个危险附体
 there is a dangerous supplement
 (...)
 母亲抱着女儿
 A mother embracing her daughter
 使躯体感觉到新生 以及
 her body feeling the new life along with
 灵魂那难舍难分的幻影
 the soul, the persistent image
 (...)
 身体隐没 [灵魂]到别处去寻找
 The body disappears [the soul] searches elsewhere
 也许寻找另一具身体
 perhaps it is searching for a new body
 (Ibid.: 37, 38)

The body Zhai refers to in this poem is a human one, and moreover clearly a female one. The poetic imagery is conventionally modernist. The beautiful female body represents death, and simultaneously foregrounds the contrast between the flower-like delicate surface and the dark dangerous wayward forces hidden within. The mother-daughter images, as well as the allusions to the fertile body and the searching soul, are further instances of typical representations of feminine bodies in women's poetry of the post-Mao era.

In the poem from 2008, the signified body is far less recognisable within the standard terms of women's poetry. First of all, it comes into writing without a gendering pronoun or name, and as such it seems to evade the discourse of sexuality and sexual difference which was constitutive of the body narratives of the 1990s. Zhai is seeking ways of speaking about the material and sensual qualities of the body that are posited outside the gendered matrix (Butler 1993). The novel "female voice" must establish itself through an unsettling of the fixed standards of writing the feminine. As such, it first renders the bodies illegible, and

consequently challenges the reader to perceive and imagine outside conventional poetics. In addition, bodies recalled by the lyrical voice in this poem are never individual ones. Subsequently, a more accurate rendition of the title of the poem would be “Bodies”. This retreat from individualism is but another strategy to avoid speaking out for gender identity grounded either in the materiality of sex or in feminine experience.

The poem is meticulously constructed around physical qualities of the body that are all associated with only one verb *zi* “渍”. Hence, bodies may be soaked, permeated, steeped into something, pickled, stained, filled up and, in consequence, tipsy or drunk. Permeated with fluids or alcohol, they ferment, bubble or overflow and eventually vaporise or transpire, disseminating sweet scents or disturbing odours. With the passage of time, the bodies may also be transformed, change their colours or textures too.

None of the above-mentioned attributes hints directly at any of the features commonly associated exclusively with the human body. The poem “Bodies” is composed from assembled images of permeated bodies, distinguishable only due to the occurrence of the two different personal pronouns “它们” (*tamen*, third person plural neuter) and “他们” (*tamen*, third person plural masculine or feminine). As a result, the initially indistinct bodies in the opening image of the poem may be identified as belonging to “drunken shrimps and crabs” (酒渍过的虾、蟹 *jiu zi guo de xia, xie*). Together with “intoxicated topics, glances and coriander”, they participate in the pantomime performed by the second constellation of inebriated bodies:

其中一个身体渍过得较多

One of the bodies there is pretty well soaked

它倒给另一个

it pours another one

另一个身体很快也醉了

The other body is also soon drunk

很快地溢了出来

soon overflows

那些溢出来的酒也被渍过了

The spilled alcohol is soaked too

被他们的汗味、皮肤味

with the smell of their sweat, of their skin,

唇腔味 还有一些复杂的体味

of their mouths There are complex odours too
 渍过了 从身体的各个毛孔泛出
 flowing out emanating from every pore of their bodies
 那些酒变得很怪 很呛人
 That alcohol becomes very strange pungently irritating
 (Zhai 2008b: 40-41)

In this delirious scene, the human body turns into a microcosm of its own. It resembles an aquarium in which the drunken shrimps and tipsy conversations sink, submerged by alcohol. First they swim like fishes, then finally start to ferment slowly, eventually turning into wine. From beginning to end of this surreal depiction the reader remains clueless while trying to grasp and name the fluid-like changing and evaporating bodies at and on the banquet table. In other words, this poem mirrors the nature of the alcohol described: simultaneously bewildering and irritating.

The poem titled “Bian xing” 变性 (Transsexual, 2008) may be discussed as another example of Zhai’s novel corporeal poetics which is distinct from the earlier body poetics of the 1980s and 1990s. It plays with the idea of the instability of gender / sex identities, and at the same time questions the gendering matrix with its clearly limited options of the intelligible feminine or masculine. With this poem Zhai inquires into one of the basic claims of feminine body writing: namely, that gender consciousness originates from distinct biological characteristics of the body.

As in the poem discussed above, the biological sex of the speaking voice remains obscure. Like the nameless “man” who is depicted in the poem while undergoing surgical sex reassignment, the lyrical voice is troubled by the wish to transform into somebody else, into “a woman”. Here however the gender of the speaker is unclear, it seems much more to be the voicing of the very basic potentiality hidden within every single person’s chromosomes to become one sex or the other (or neither).

The absence of stable gender identities is, in the opening stanza of the poem, first anchored in its cultural historical and contemporary re-enactments:

他既不是红孩儿，也不是齐天大圣
 Since he is neither Red Boy nor Sun Wukong⁶¹

⁶¹ Red Boy and Sun Wukong are characters from the *Journey to the West* who were capable of transforming their bodies into different shapes.

所以只能求助于整容医院

He can only seek help from plastic surgery

传说观世音也是个男人，一说为女

It is said Guanshiyin was a man too, others say a woman

也就是说：观世音是男 / 女性？

Does that mean Guanshiyin was M / F?

(Zhai 2008b: 51)

The poem introduces three different perspectives on gender issues. The first one is that of the main protagonist of the poem, the one undergoing surgery. He is introduced indirectly by the speaking voice, which reports on the transformation in a detached narrative manner. The speaking voice's personal perspective is troubled by the wish to be allowed to "love men as a woman can" (这样我就可以像女人一样爱男人 *zheyang wo jiu keyi xiang nüren yiyang ai nanren*). In addition, there is an audience in front of which the happenings depicted are displayed. This staging of the sex / gender transgression calls to mind Judith Butler's claim that gender is never "done" individually:

[O]ne does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my "own" gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author, or indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a society that has no single author.

(Butler 2004: 1)

Here the watching audience may be seen as representing the set of prevailing social norms which directly implicate and limit acceptable behaviours, desires and bodies. It is the source of anxiety and of the wish to compromise with the norm:

这个男人有另一个男人

This man has another man

这令在座的其他男人愤愤不已

Which makes the other men there furious

当他们滑进舞池 嘘声四起

The moment they emerge on the dance floor hissing arises from every side

(Zhai 2008b: 51-52)

Dancing is one of those typical situations in which gender roles are conventionally

standardised and performed. Here, these firm convictions about “proper dancing” are being challenged. The norm is transgressed as soon as the homosexual couple emerges on stage. Rejection follows. The public dimension of the body is exposed in this picture.

There is another significant difference which may be noticed with regard to the earlier body poetics. In women’s poetry, femininity was naturally attributed to female bodies only, which were considered to be the origin of feminine consciousness. Furthermore, and understandably within the framework of women’s poetry as a historical phenomenon, this notion of femininity has been commonly delineated within an aesthetics of withdrawal from the public sphere. The woman / women aimed at reintroducing the female body into writing, and in order to achieve this goal they first had to rediscover themselves within an environment which had been cleared of political and social influences. Consequently, images of dark empty rooms or of deserts are numerous in women’s poetry of the 1980s.⁶²

In contrast, the contemporary female voice has already bid farewell to aesthetic withdrawal and, as a result, it is inevitably bound to the social. The private issues of femininity / masculinity often emerge within the larger context of social criticism and gradually become part of it.

From this perspective, “Transsexual” may be read as a critique of the impossibility of thinking sex or gender differently, i.e. outside the social or cultural norm. Ironically, the femininity of the transsexual male is laboriously constructed according to the standards originating from the cliché-ridden conservative images of womanliness:

经过整容的男人现在不怕了

After his face-lift the man is not afraid any more

眼睛：笑意盈盈

Eyes: charmingly smiling

现在充满了性别意识

now full of gender consciousness

鼻子：很挺拔、很妖媚、很有型

Nose: tall and straight, coquettish, shapely

嘴：呼吸之间 不只是说话

Mouth: between breaths it not only speaks

⁶² Examples of this typical imagery may be found in, among others, the following poems: “Hei fangjian” 黑房间 (Black room) by Zhai Yongming, “Single woman’s bedroom” by Yi Lei, or in “Hei shamo” 黑沙漠 (Black desert) by Tang Yaping.

它要传达某种暧昧

it must also convey a kind of ambiguity

尤其是如今它已丰盈

especially when like today it is full and round

喉结：它在也不会滚上来滚下去

Adam's apple: it will never be able to roll up and down again

随着羞怯它被割去

It was excised out of shame

乳腺：当它增厚 成为许多块状

Mammary glands: as they become thicker composed of many layers

它也随性欲充血

they fill up with blood when desire comes

它将变得起伏如牡蛎

they become undulating like oysters

(Ibid.: 52)

The transgression is paradoxically undertaken only to submit to another set of norms, which are delineated by the corset of conventional femininity. Like a corset, the inquiry into issues of sexuality and gender identity inevitably touches the body, sometimes in a painful way. Zhai seeks to destabilise the gendered body proper by trying to reach beyond the recognised modes of speaking and imagining it. However, she remains aware of the troubled nature of bodily discourses, which regard the body concomitantly as a source of freedom and oppression:

Yet, it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings. (...)

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal.

(Butler 2004: 20, 21)

In her poem Zhai questions the limits of agency and autonomy of self-expression. Significantly, she repeats the question of bodhisattva Guanyin's sex in the title of one of her essays written in the same period of time as the poem. This time, however, gender uncertainty is generalised as a common condition shared by every human:

我们都是男 / 女性？

Are we all male / female?

(Zhai 2008b: 18)

To conclude, sex or gender identity is not predetermined by biology and as such is no longer the unavoidable destiny as depicted in earlier women's poetry. Gender, in Zhai's own words, is much more about the language it is expressed in and the perspective it is viewed from:

这只是换了一个说法

This is just saying it another way

不对，也可以说换了一双眼睛

Or else, one can also speak of seeing it with other eyes

(Zhai 2008b: 51)

Most delicate words

The image of the corset of social norms not only closes my discussion of "Transsexual", but at the same time recalls the image of the cangue from the "Rhapsody for Yu Xuanji". These two instruments of confinement both symbolise the social norm imposed upon the body. Although the title of Zhai's collection of writings directly puts the focus on poetical language, the body has remained at the core of her poetry. She tests the limits of poetical language, searching for a novel poetical imagery, one that matches the condition of the world now and here. The female voice rises already deeply embedded in social criticism, sometimes full of anger, as in 关于雏妓的一次报道 "Guanyu chuji de yi ci baogao" (Report on a child prostitute):

看报纸的时候我一直在想:

Reading the paper I keep thinking:

不能为这个写诗

You can't write a poem about this

不能把诗变成这样

You can't turn poetry into something like this

不能把诗嚼得嘎蹦直响

You can't chew up a poem

不能把词敲成牙齿 去反复啃咬

Or hammer words into teeth to eat away

(...)

诗、绷带、照片、回忆

Poem, bandages, photos, memory

刮伤我的眼睛

They scratch at my eyes

(这是视网膜明暗交接地带)

(Here in the retinal zone where dark and light meet)

一切全表明：都是无用的

It's all quite clear: it's useless

都是无人关心得伤害

No one cares about this damage

都是每一天得数据 它们

It's just a daily quotient of data

正在创造出某些人一生的悲哀

Creating a life of misery for someone else⁶³

(Zhai 2008b: 18-19)

This poem, based on a newspaper report of a twelve-year-old girl who was abducted and forced into prostitution, is neither euphemistic nor allusive. The lyrical voice recalls the story in straight words and with the focus on the suffering of the damaged one. The originality of this poetic has already been acknowledged:

前面的讨论中我站在那么高的角度去评价《关于雏妓的一次报告》，就是因为我第一次发现女性诗歌和男性写作的明显区别，我如果写这个报道，就不可能有翟永明这样的女性角度。她的愤怒我也会有，但我永远不可能有一个“女儿身”来感受那种伤害。这就是这首诗里独特的东西。

(Zhai, Ouyang, et al. 2010: 112)

The reason I have spoken in such high terms of “Report on a child prostitute” is that [this poem] allowed me to discover for the first time the striking difference between women’s poetry and men’s writing. If I had written this report I could have never spoken from the female perspective like Zhai Yongming. I might share her anger, but I could never experience such an injury “with a young girl’s body”. That is what is unique in this poem.

This opinion by Ouyang Jianghe hints at the latent and unchangeably strong expectation from the reading public that almost automatically associates women’s poetry with writing about the individual and shared female body experience. Since the late 1980s women poets have been

⁶³ Translation by Andrea Lingenfelter, modified.

engaged in a vivid exchange of views aiming at defining and defending the originality of their contribution to the field of literature. Especially in the so-called golden age of women's poetry, they intensively explored the empowering creative potentialities hidden in their own corporeal resources. The body-centred focus of this literary enquiry into the previously silenced topic of sexual difference led however to a simple equalisation of women's poetry with confessional body poetics. The later trajectories of women's writing may be seen as strongly influenced by the legacies of this original selective (mis)reading. In addition, the reluctant reactions by female authors to the labels "woman poet" and "feminist" may be regarded as an immediate consequence of this narrow reception of their writings.

Zhai Yongming's turn to historical resources and the re-introduction of the notion of "female voice" into current discourse on literature seem to aim at moving the discussion further, into a post-women's poetry period. Accordingly, in her poetry written in the new millennium, an opening towards society, accompanied by a broadening of the thematic and linguistic spectrum, makes itself noticeable. This does not necessarily mean a turn away from the female body. Nevertheless, this gendered body in poetry is no longer the subject of confession or an isolated object of narcissistic introspection. On the contrary, it is shown as embedded in a dense, long-lasting matrix, often inherited from the past, of constraints that emerge at the intersections of gender, class and ethnic difference.

Chapter 4

Postmodern somatography

Surfaces

“‘Furong’ shang de Yin Lichuan” 《芙蓉》上的尹丽川 (Yin Lichuan in Furong / Lotus) by Duo Yu 朵渔 (b. 1973) and “Wei Hui lai le” 卫慧来了 (Wei Hui has arrived) by Shen Haobo 沈浩波 are two poems included in the first issue of the unofficial poetry journal *Lower Body* (2000). Their titles point directly to two female authors whose work is regarded by scholars (see Chapter 2) as the epitome of avant-garde Chinese postmodern body writing. Significantly, both authors refer in these poems to the phenomena of visibility and related recognisability of young female members of the hip urban literary scene. Even if, at the time, Yin Lichuan was seen as a rising avant-garde poet and art-house film director, and Wei Hui as a fashionable novelist, in the popular imagination they both embodied the new “unconventional” (另类 *linglei*) femininity: cool, bohemian and promiscuous.

The opening verses in Duo Yu’s poem refer to the “iconic” visual representation of Yin Lichuan, which may be found, among others, in the aforementioned issue of *The Lower Body* and in the journal *Lotus*, which is mentioned in the title of the poem: she is seen lighting a cigarette with her left hand, strands of hair veiling her face. Approximately in the middle of the poem a surprising turn occurs in this overtly ironic description of the physicality of the attractive young woman. Duo Yu parodies a book-jacket introduction of the female author:

女，1973 年生 ……北京大学……法国电影

Female, born in 1973... Peking University... French film

写各种文学……现居……

Writes all kinds of literature ... now lives in...

就好像：鸡腿一只……生姜……也可清蒸

Looks much like: one chicken leg... fresh ginger... can also be steamed

一顿自助的秀色大餐

A help-yourself feast for the eyes

(...)

像我这样的人还很多 当他们听说 “一个年轻女作家”

There are many people like me

As soon as they hear “young female author”

他们首先想到的是“能不能认识一下”

the first thing that comes to their mind is, “Might I be able to meet her?”

(Duo Yu 2000: 42-43)

In this short poem Duo hints at the dull conventional style used by the official media to introduce new authors – they might just as well be presenting a simple cooking recipe. The picture of the attractive female poet that inevitably accompanies the biographical information stirs the male viewer’s imagination in a different way, representing as it does nothing more than a potential object of consumption. In this poem Duo Yu remains faithful to the male Lower Body poets’ “macho-sexist” style (van Crevel 2008: 335), suggesting that he is not the only one who might be more interested in the author’s body than in her texts.

Shen Haobo’s colloquial short poem refers to the dynamics of gossip dissemination. Wei Hui, who was a key person in the global mass culture at the turn of the century, does not even need to be described. Everybody has had the opportunity to see a picture of her, so she would be immediately recognised when arriving in the hidden cool bar:

(...)

小崔说

Xiao Cui said

卫慧来了

Wei Hui’s come

在她手指的方向

Her finger pointed in the direction of

一个女孩

a girl

安静地坐着

sitting there quietly

比起照片

Compared to the pictures

既不丑陋

she was neither ugly

也不漂亮

nor beautiful

她长得就跟

she looked exactly

卫慧一样

like Wei Hui

(Shen 2000: 9)

The reader remains baffled, but perhaps it doesn't even matter if Wei Hui is there or not. Shen seems to hint at a phenomenon inherent to popular culture, namely that of conferring celebrity status on individuals who are not necessarily outstanding, or similarly, representing somebody's arrival or non-arrival as an "event".

Both poems are good examples of "Lower Body" aesthetics, which have been comprehensively presented by van Crevel in his study (2008: 305-343). Even if the poems might be considered one-dimensional and textually shallow, they are far from being trivial. In this case, Duo and Shen summarise in simple words several striking developments in the Chinese literary scene during the second half of the 1990s. Due to the ongoing economic transformations and the growing impact of globalisation, urbanisation or the introduction of new technologies – to list only a few of the factors which might have triggered the changes within the cultural production – women writers born in the seventies or later belong to the first cohort of authors in contemporary China who are recognisable not only due to their distinct literary style but also because of their often uncompromising personal appearance. In other words, they challenged the notion of female authorship as elaborated since the late 1980s, based on "body narratives" or "women's poetry": not only did they introduce their own "body writing", but at the same time they performed their social role as female authors in innovatively unconventional ways.

This turn towards enhanced visibility may be traced back to the 1998 special issue of the renowned literary magazine *Writers*, which was dedicated entirely to female authors born in the 1970s. Apart from fulfilling their main task of introducing literary works, the editors encouraged young writers to provide them with a selection of pictures together with a brief authorial commentary. Even in these early attempts to stage themselves as recognisable (literary) personalities, Wei Hui and Mian Mian's self-presentations may already be seen as foreshadowing their later enactments of female authorship.

Wei Hui, whose short story "Hudie de jianjiao" 蝴蝶的尖叫 (Scream of a butterfly) opens the special issue, appears in the pictures as the chameleon of the literary scene. She is shown as capable of changing bodily shape and colour: once as an anorexic student intent on painting her hair blue, and then finally as an upper-middle-class lady with the typical status symbols, portrayed in a manner resembling the representations of feminine beauty captured in Yang

Fudong's 杨福东⁶⁴ (b. 1971) photographs. Assuming that these pictures were carefully chosen by Wei Hui herself, the understanding of "body writing" might indeed be broadened to include her non-textual performances. These pictures do not narrow the gap between the female author and her readers, they seem to be pure surfaces or simulacra without an original, and as such, they leave one with a disturbing sense of confusion.⁶⁵

In the first of the pictures of Mian Mian published in *Writers*, she is seen wearing a flowery *qipao* and heavy make-up in a dark bar in Shanghai – the attire and setting very typical and almost automatically associated by readers with the body writing phenomenon. In the second picture Mian Mian poses as a child in a rural environment, thereby possibly hinting at the cuteness of the new female literary avant-garde. The last photograph confirms Mian Mian's image as the bad girl of Chinese literature: she is seen face on, squatting on the ground, knees apart in the utterly unfeminine pose of the unsophisticated, and smoking a cigarette.

This enhanced visibility of the Post-70s has already achieved the status of an acknowledged fact among academics, as the following quotations show:

1998 年,《作家》第 7 期推出一组 70 年代出生的女作家小说专号,在封二封三配上了这些女作家的照片,看上去像是时尚招贴画。(Chen 2009: 423)

In 1998, the seventh issue of the magazine 'Writers' was a special one dedicated to a group of female authors born in the 1970s. On its inside front and back covers, there were pictures of these authors that looked like trendy posters [of stars].

有趣的是,她们的小说总是伴随美丽时尚的照片发表。或许,就某种意义而言,写作同照片一样,都是塑个人 / 70 年代形象的手段。(Meng, et al. 2000: 276)

What is interesting is that their novels are always published with beautiful trendy photos [of the writers]. A reason for this might be that text and photos alike serve to mould an image of the individual [writer] and of the 70s.

Not surprisingly, these female writers finally became widely known as the "beautiful writers" (美女作家 *meinü zuojia*⁶⁶).

⁶⁴ Yang Fudong is considered one of China's most well-known photographers. In his works people are "profusely beautiful [...], as if their bodies were not really real, as if to present the polished surfaces of grand feelings" (Huber & Zhao 2013: 263). Furthermore, one more parallel between Wei Hui's self-staging and another famous series of pictures may be drawn, namely Cindy Sherman's "Untitled film stills". In her works Sherman thematises the non-coincidence between the visual representation of women and the actual empirical woman, or, in other words, the production of woman as a text (see Bronfen in Bussmann & Hof 1995: 432-442).

⁶⁵ Similarities may be seen here to Megan M. Ferry's observations: "Indeed, many interviewers have written of her [Wei Hui's] elusiveness, of the inability to pin her down, of the many 'Wei Hui's' they have confronted, and her ability to leave them wondering 'if she is abnormal, or if [they are] abnormal?'" (Ferry 2003: 62).

⁶⁶ This term has been translated into English as "Glamlit Writers", "Beauty Writers", "glamour girl writers" or

The majority of the critics associated the Beauty Writers with mass culture and fashionable magazines for women. What remained silently hidden behind the Babes' hypervisibility on the literary market was the growing number of far less "trendy" and older writers who were becoming increasingly conscious of the significance of their visual appearance in literary magazines and on the Internet. In the light of the fragment of Duo Yu's poem quoted above, it becomes clear that pictures of avant-garde poets circulating in public will be subject to the same criteria as any pictures of attractive women.⁶⁷ They will be judged and finally objectified. Consequently, the visual turn within the literary scene should be seen as another facet of the ongoing struggle for the control of definitions of femininity, masculinity and the legible body proper.⁶⁸

Tensions

As already discussed in Chapter 2, to date no critical consensus could be reached in regard to the evaluation of the aesthetic qualities of texts typically associated with the body writing phenomenon. Furthermore, with regard to this topic, most common lines of argumentation were developed around the notion of the increasing commercialisation of literature on the global publishing market, followed by the notion of the postmodern crisis of values and of the annihilation of the human subject. What went widely unnoticed by the male critics was the inherently ambivalent nature of this fiction and poetry when examined from the feminist perspective. On the other hand, it remained a significant point of interest for mainly Western-

"Babe Writers". For more see: Knight 2003, Merry 2003, Shi 2003, Kong 2005, Lu 2007 and Schaffer & Song 2014. In the social sciences-oriented approach to contemporary literature by women, which is most commonly shared by Western and sinophone critics, the "Beauty Writers" phenomenon has been linked to such different phenomena as the "new, new humankind" (新新人类 *xin xin renlei*) (Merry 2003, Shi 2003), "Generation X" (Kong 2005) or to chick lit and the "Gen Y" (Schaffer & Song 2014). For Chinese academics, the notion of postmodernism remains the most preferred framework (see Chapter 2).

⁶⁷ Van Crevel, for instance, recognises the following with regard to the Lower Body: "A remarkable thing about the Lower Body was that the authors put forth a consciously hip visual presentation, which was uncommon in literary circles at the time but has since spread far beyond the unofficial journals that initiated it." (2008: 335)

⁶⁸ In personal interviews conducted in 2010, Zhai Yongming stated that she had decided to reedit several of her books due to the poor aesthetic quality of previous editions. Zhou Zan responded with anger to the publication of anthologies of contemporary women's poetry illustrated with romantic and seductive pictures of young women (see also in Zhou 2007: 154). The issue is further problematised by unofficial publications which often follow a similar pattern and juxtapose writings by women with pictures of attractive poets or lightly clad models (compare Huang 2002, 2003). Consequently, the dissemination of such visual representations should be regarded as problematic not only in connection with commercialized popular or mass culture, but also in avant-garde and unofficial renderings.

oriented female academics, among whom Dai Jinhua may be seen as representative in her voicing of certain constraints:

Her [Wei Hui's] book "Shanghai baobei" (Shanghai Baby) is full of women's material desires, middle-class imagination, and the worship of things Western in the name of alternative culture or feminism. [...] What is a feminist to make of this kind of writing and what can she say about it when it expresses a worship of Paris and Henry Milleresque fantasies and when it expresses a wish to experience sadistic mistreatment, or the frustration of the idle dissolute women who frequent seedy urban bars? (Dai 2004: 292-293)

Although Dai's opinion of Wei Hui's writing remains far from sympathetic, she cautiously warns "feminists or critics of women's literature" against ignoring or rejecting it too hastily. According to Dai, if only because of the outburst of chauvinistic reactions to Wei Hui's and Mian Mian's writing and public appearances which finally led to their books being banned, their body writing deserves further consideration as a challenge to male-dominated culture. It may be observed that with the passage of time such an ambiguous and "problematizing" approach has become the stance most frequently adopted by female critics in regard to the "Beauty Writers" phenomenon.

Significantly, from today's perspective, the body writing narrowly defined as Beauty Writer and Lower Body literary performances, seems to have already achieved historical status.⁶⁹ Even if Wei Hui and Mian Mian have not yet entirely ceased writing, their interests have gradually shifted to other fields, and the *Xiabanshen* poets have parted to exploit different artistic paths. The notion of "body writing" has nevertheless not entirely vanished from the critical discourse. On the contrary, it remains a valid critical idiom, especially when dealing with fiction by women that openly treats issues of urban female sexuality.

The revisiting of body writing texts in this chapter aims at an inquiry into textual features which have not yet been widely thematised. While Wei Hui's novel *Shanghai Baby* and Mian Mian's *Candy* formed the focus and vantage point from which the scandalous and sociological – rather than literary – phenomenon was approached,⁷⁰ questions regarding the corporeal poetics and literary positioning of these texts still linger. This chapter will scrutinise distinct literary phenomena on the margins of so-called body writing, thus taking the genre out of the isolation it has been forced into by the majority of critics; at the same time, the

⁶⁹ A comprehensive overview of the body writing discourse in the Chinese language may be found in Xie 2010.

⁷⁰ As these two novels have already been analysed at length by critics, their importance as references is tacitly acknowledged, but the line of argument will be developed by focusing on other texts.

genre's links to other literary manifestations will be shown. Furthermore the chapter will investigate the significance of this wide body of literary and visual texts from a gender-oriented perspective with the aim of throwing light on the subversive potential of the scandal of the writing body.

Gender trouble in the *jianghu*

As already mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the persistent questions in discussions about the body writing phenomenon was that of its origin. While for some of the critics it was to be found in women's writing, others voiced in favour of a lyrical genesis. This last view has eventually become predominant in Western academia:

With precedents traced to the mid-1980s, the use of the irreverent was taken to an extreme by two groups: "Lower body" (*xiabanshen*) and "trash" (*laji*, pronounced as *lese* in Taiwan). The lower-body poets shocked the public with their explicit description of carnal desire and sexual acts in rejection of the "upper body" (such as intellect, emotion, tradition). The lower body also contributed to the trend of "body writing" (*shenti xiezu*) at the turn of the century. (Yeh 2013: 670)

It is significant that the widely shared definitions of body writing lump fiction by young women together with poetry by male and female authors, but it is only the first group of texts that has been the excessive object of gender-oriented questioning. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether or not it can be argued convincingly that all these authors share a distinct aesthetic outlook.⁷¹

Texts by female members of the Lower Body constitute a thought-provoking example, as one would expect them to be the focal point at which the discourses of the body, women's poetry and feminism intersect. Surprisingly the issue of gender has been widely omitted in the vivid exchange about their scandalous appearance. Yin Lichuan and Shen Haobo became "the faces" of the Lower Body poetry group, which may conjure up an illusion of gender equality or transparency. In fact, even the short poem by Duo Yu makes clear that the public circulation of Yin and Shen's visual representations was later subsumed to two entirely different logics of reception.

Yin Lichuan may be identified as the member of the Lower Body who was perhaps the most successful in crossing the borders of this literary group in search of alternative affiliations.

⁷¹ Apart from the coincidences which result from their similar age, educational and social backgrounds and the urban environment in which they live.

Her poems appeared in the fourth (2002) and sixth (2004) editions of the *Wings* journal. Consequently, it may be assumed that they have been recognised as roughly in line with the magazine's credo and its definition of women's poetry. In the foreword to the fourth issue, Zhai Yongming expressed her gratitude to the editors for introducing works by the young poets Yin Lichuan, Fan Fan 饭饭 (born in the 1970s) and Cao Shuying 曹疏影 (b. 1979).⁷² In general, Yin is one of the two Lower Body female poets whose poetry shows little affinity with typical women's poetry of the 1980s and 1990s. She does not stress the peculiarity of feminine experience. In her writings one finds a self-assured female persona, and this may be regarded as a novel subject position not to be found within the horizon of choices available to older poets. Accordingly, her works may be considered post-*nüxingzhuyi* (and in this sense postfeminist), as the majority of them do not ponder over the issue of gender difference. Chen Xiaoming (2009) even discovers in Yin's poetry the possible endpoint of women's poetry. It nevertheless remains doubtful if the subsumption of her writing to this lyrical tradition solely on the basis of her biological sex and her blatant descriptions of sexual desires is the right critical choice:

已经呈现了“下半身”的女性诗歌还能回到盛装温馨的场景中吗？难道说它就是女性主义诗歌期待已久的解放吗？(Chen 2009: 474)

Is it possible for women's poetry to return to the soft and elegant manner after it has revealed its "lower body"? Or can we say that this is the long awaited emancipation of feminist poetry?

"Nü qiangren" 女强人 (Strong woman,⁷³ published 2002 in *Wings*) is one of the two poems by Yin Lichuan which may be most easily connected with the aesthetic trajectories of women's poetry. This long poem consists of six only loosely interrelated parts. The overall topic of the first five parts of the poem is the cliché-ridden understanding of femininity and masculinity inherent to mass culture. It is summarised in a way that reveals Yin's sense of humour and her ironical stance towards today's society of the commodified spectacle:

骂吧骂吧 ……说辞都准备好了……

⁷² A look at official and unofficial publications from the beginning of the new millennium confirms the inclusive tendencies and high permeability of various literary circles. The poetry of Yin Lichuan and Wu Ang was published in the unofficial journals *Wings* and *Poetry and People*, while at the same time Zhai Yongming has been officially accepted as member of the mainly younger generation's *shi jianghu* (see Fu 2002).

⁷³ The strong woman is an ambivalent identification. Since the 1990s, women in positions of power, those holding a higher degree or emphasizing career and personal development, have been labelled "*nü qiangren*" (see Zhong 2008: 651-652).

Scold, scold ... the pretext is ready
 “一个女人贩卖青春”
 “A woman selling her youth”
 “又一个女人贩卖青春”
 “Another woman selling her youth”
 男人卖不掉自己
 Men can't sell themselves
 就卖别人的
 so they sell others
 让我们互相攀比
 Let's weigh up and compare
 哄抬童年、甩卖老年
 childhood: appreciating in value; old age: marked down
 热销青春期
 adolescence: selling well
 你的良心是杆
 Your conscience is the beam
 群众的良心是秤砣
 the conscience of the common people is the sliding weight
 我不懂算数
 I'm no good at sums
 你也斗不过群众
 Anyway you can't fight the common people
 (Yin 2002a: 108)

“The strong woman” seems, according to Yin, to be born out of a dialectical move of protest against these conventional images of soft and submissive femininity, which may be found at the core of traditional and popular culture. Her existence is, however, paradoxically based on a resigned withdrawal from this society, and not on its subversion. The last part of the poem is one of the most lyrical ones among Yin's writing. It recalls the known imaginary of women's poetry with its narcissistic investment in one's own bodily genealogy accompanied by a rejection of the masculine element:

(...)

 可当初没有你

But without you from the beginning

我怎么会强大

how could I have grown strong

我的皮肤在扩张

my skin is expanding

我的肉体是海

my body is an ocean

那么再见

so goodbye

我亲爱的人

my beloved

我忧伤的水手

my sorrowful sailor

(...)

我有足够的心情和大米

I have enough verve, enough rice

足够的船只

enough ships

(...)

就这样

and so

我不需要拉萨、

I don't need Lhasa,

尼泊尔和喜马拉雅

Nepal or the Himalayas

不需要重头再来

I don't need to come again

不需要被出生

I don't need to be birthed

我正分娩了自己

I've just now given birth to myself

(Yin 2002a:109)

The association of the female body with water may also be found in the works of other women poets. In Zhai Yongming's early body poetics, female corporeality is often signified

as pulsating, made of water and blood, which frequently stands for gestation.⁷⁴ These images, furthermore, recall the pivotal metaphors from Cixous' meditation on woman writing with her body:

But that's it – our seas are what we make them, fishy or not, impenetrable or muddled, red or black, high and rough or flat and smooth, narrow straits or shoreless, and we ourselves are sea, sands, corals, seaweeds, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves... seas and mothers.
(Cixous 2008: 88-89)

Jeanne Hong Zhang argued convincingly that Zhai Yongming's poetic debut "Women" is organised around two principal metaphors, those of blood and childbirth (2004: 95-97). Zhou Zan points to the crucial role of this imagery in the process of the invention of feminine genealogy and history, which has been overwritten by patriarchal historiography (Zhou 2007: 226-228). No less important, maternity has been the empowering device of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva's *écriture*, also through the comparison of women's creativity to gestation and giving birth.

In her poem "Mama" 妈妈 (Mother, published in *Wings*, 2002), Yin takes the legacies of women's poetry further. The first-person narrator of the poem inquires into the paradoxical nature of the mother-daughter bond, which is marked by the communion of flesh and at the same time by differences in life philosophy. She speaks from the position of a distant quizzical observer, while her mother provides the mute projection surface for her daughter's resentment:

(...) 一个女人
 (...) How ever can a woman
 怎么会是另一个女人
 be another woman's
 的妈妈。带着相似的身体
 mother. My body being similar
 我该做你没做过的事么，妈妈
 ought I do all the things you never did, Mama
 你曾那么的美丽，直到生下了我
 you used to be so pretty, until you gave birth to me

⁷⁴ See Zhang 2004: 92-98.

自从我认识你， 你不在水性杨花
 by the time I got to know you you'd given up all coquetry
 为了另一个女人
 was it worth becoming like that
 你这样做值得么
 for the sake of another woman?
 (Yin 2002b: 9)

In this poem, the daughter's voice questions her mother's life project to the point of rejecting the ideology of self-sacrifice which marked the older woman's life. This is the daughter's cruel assessment of the older generation of women, and simultaneously it is a declaration of independence. Yin's interpretation of the much-explored topic shows that the ambiguity inherent to the image of the mother as the object of "both identification and differentiation" (Zhang 2004: 155) has not been significantly overwritten by the post-1970s generation.

Today, this poem remains Yin's most evident contribution to women's poetry. "Mother" is the only one of Yin's poems that was included in the text corpus on which performances devoted to women's poetry by the independent theatre ensemble "Piaochong Jushe" 瓢虫剧社 (Ladybird Theatre, led by the female director Cao Kefei 曹克非) are based. Zhou Zan, together with the *Wings* editorial team, is responsible for the script, she was also one of the active performers. To date, two spectacles dedicated entirely to women's poetry have been staged: "Qitu pohuai yishi de yuren" 企图破坏仪式的女人, (Woman attempting to disturb the ritual), in 2010, and "Chengzuo guo shanched fei xiang weilai" 乘坐过山车飞向未来, (Riding a rollercoaster and flying into the future), in 2011. Interestingly, in 2011 Yin's poem was not excluded from the show, although she had been severely criticised by Zhai Yongming and Zhou Zan⁷⁵ for her earlier cooperation with Zhang Yimou 张艺某 (b. 1951) in the film "Shanzhashu zhi lian" 山楂树之恋 (Love under the hawthorn tree, 2010). Zhai described the movie production as symptomatic of the Neo-Confucian backlash in contemporary China:

把“婚前守贞”写在教材里面，不是一个突然的事件，而是社会缓慢的一个变化。比如张艺某最近拍了一部电影叫《山楂树之恋》，讲述了在那个压抑的年代里，也是女性被压抑的年代里“处女”的概念：处女怎么可贵怎么清纯。张艺某在挑演员的时候就宣布，大概意思是现在要找一处女太难了，找不到那么清纯的女孩。（…）整个电影就是代表那一代男性的集体记忆，好像是说，只有在那个年代才有那么珍贵的处女。

(Zhai & Yang 2012: 266)

⁷⁵ Personal conversations with Zhai and Zhou in 2010 (Beijing) and 2011 (Chengdu).

“Chastity before marriage” is not something that turned up in schoolbooks out of the blue, rather it reflects a gradual change in society. For example, Zhang Yimou’s most recent film, “Love under the hawthorn tree”, illustrates the idea of the “pure woman” during the period of oppression [Cultural Revolution], that also happened to be a period of women’s oppression; how noble and pure that maiden was! While he was looking for actors, Zhang even announced, more or less, that these days it is almost impossible to find a virgin, you can’t find such pure girls. (...) What the film as a whole represents is the collective memory of the men of his generation, as if it intended to say that only in that period did such precious virgins exist.

Yin herself has never commented at length on her own attitude towards feminism and women’s poetry. Her poems may however be read as a manifestation of the move beyond the constraints imposed by society, and not only on female bodies. This interpretation would be in unison with her own understanding of the Lower Body’s contribution to the emancipation of Chinese culture:

古人的下半身被阉割掉了，后果由今人承受 —— 咱们的文化是阉割过的文化。女人就更别提了，从三从四德到小脚金莲，上下半身，一概地没有，上品就是一把打造精良的中式椅子：快来坐我呀，瞧我多么驯服。男人们轻咳一声，用上半身坐了下去。

(Yin 2000: 119)

The lower bodies of the ancients were castrated, and the people of our era are still bearing the consequences – our culture is a castrated culture. Not to mention women: from the three obediences and four virtues to the bound “golden lotus” feet, they had neither upper nor lower bodies, the best of them were like exquisite Chinese-style chairs: come, sit down on me, see how docile I am. Men coughed delicately and, using their upper bodies, sat down.

Contrary to what was implied in most women’s writing of the 1990s and in the main Glamlit novels like *Shanghai Baby*, Yin does not perceive the female body as granting unique access to any particular knowledge or artistic sensitivity. Similarly, Yin does not voice that distinctively female anger or grief that has recently become louder within the group of older poets. It seems that, in accordance with Ge & Song’s observations in *Body Politics* (see Chapter 2), Lower Body writing remains outside the dialectics of revolutionary or post-Maoist ideological projects. That would partially explain its ephemerality and its performance art-like status.

Wu Ang was the least visible female member of the Lower Body crowd. Unlike Yin Lichuan’s texts, the majority of Wu’s poems clearly bear marks of women’s poetry. She presents images of vulnerable, often diseased or insane, feminine corporeality in many of her works. Like the women poets of the 1980s and 1990s, Wu focuses on the topic of gender difference. Accordingly, her poems may be read as an expression of femininity (*nüxing*),

feminine consciousness and corporeal experience. Furthermore, she continues to explore the topics commonly understood as controversial, such as sexual intercourse, abortion, decrepitude and decay of the aging female body. Apart from these important overlapping thematic interests, there is nevertheless one crucial difference between Wu Ang's writings and women's poetry, namely that of the poetic language. Wu's poems conform without exception to the *Lower Body's* mundane aesthetics along with their colloquial, shallow and direct language. Tuning in with other members of this poetry group, she rejects the notion of *shiyi* 诗意 (poetic sentiment) as belonging to the "upper body's" conceptual range. Consequently, Wu Ang's works, like the majority of Yin Lichuan's poetry, do not quote from the standard lexicon of women's poetry with its nocturnal, aquatic, psychological and maternal vocabulary. A quintessential example of Wu Ang's anti-lyrical feminine poetics is to be found in the cycle of eight poems titled "Funübing" 妇女病 (Women's diseases), published in the second issue of the *Lower Body* (2001). Wu describes the hospital as perhaps the most genuine setting for the whole range of distinctly female bodily experience. The cycle resembles women's poetry with its themes of gestation, giving birth or having an abortion, and aging, but at the same time the female body is exposed in all its triviality and meaninglessness. The crass language of the first-person narrator of the poems is stripped of adjectives or adverbs and of emotion, and as such it remains in full accordance with the *Lower Body* philosophy of rejection of the sublime. It deprives the female body of any mystery or narcissistic self-investment, but it does not deprive it of agency, as the typical anti-gestation poem titled "Dongtian yu baicai" 冬天与白菜 (Winter and cabbage) by Wu shows:

从小杯内取出试纸

I take the test strip out of the small glass

我往肚子里倒了袋热奶

I pour a bag of hot milk into my belly

给我早熟的胎儿

to give my precocious foetus

加点水分

some more liquid

天正冷得让人心慌

When the weather gets really cold people get nervous

楼梯上的白菜冻住了

The cabbage in the staircase has frozen

我弯下腰

I bend down

把指头插在菜心里

and stick my finger into a cabbage heart

那个医生

That doctor

去除我营养丰富的胎儿

will remove my well-nourished foetus

如同我正在摘的

exactly the same way as I'm picking up

这棵白菜

this cabbage

(Wu 2001: 84)

Even a brief comparison of Wu's confession with perhaps the most well-known poem on abortion by Zhang Zhen 张真 (b. 1962), which was published in the first anthology of women's poetry *A Leopard on a Tree* edited by Cui Weiping (1993: 192-193), will suffice to expose the radicalism of Wu's rejection of the earlier poetics. Zhang's poem may be read as a journey into the psyche of a mourning woman. It is the soliloquy of a guilty woman who is trying, in spite of everything, to establish a relationship with her unborn child based on the promise that she will remember it forever (Zhang 2004: 91; for an English translation of the poem see Tao & Prince 2006: 101-103). Wu's attention, on the contrary, remains captured by trivial external circumstances such as the cold weather and cabbages. Throughout her entire cycle of eight poems there are no signs of existential pathos, adherence to humanist values or emotionality. The traces of irony and cynicism nevertheless give rise to doubts whether "Women's Diseases" was not originally planned as a mocking rewriting or even a caricature of one of the cycles of poems conventionally understood today as prototypical of the formation of women's poetry (such as Zhai Yongming's "Women", Tai Yaping's "Heise Shamo" 黑色沙漠 or Zhang Zhen's "Yuanwang" 愿望, poem series).

Wu Ang's openly declared lack of interest in feminist alliances pairs well with the Lower Body poets' programmatic ignorance of ideology and their anti-intellectual rhetoric.⁷⁶ In her

⁷⁶ For an overview of Lower Body performances during the so-called Popular-Intellectual Polemic see Crevel 2008: 399-458.

short essay “Wo wei shenme xie xing” 我为什么写性 (Why do I write about sex), published in the journal *Poetry and People* (2002: 385), Wu argues for the possibility of an honest expression of female sexuality outside the feminist-pornographic binary. Her argumentation does not however reach beyond uneasiness with feminism voiced in a tone which comforts the aforementioned distrust the older generation of women poets felt regarding the women’s movement. According to Wu, her poetry should be classified as “feminine” or “of female sex” (*nüxing*). The feminist label she speaks against in the essay is *nüquanzhuyi*. This does not however exclude the perception of her as a poet of gender difference or even of corporeal feminism, of one who consciously rewrites the earlier body poetics:

沈浩波有一回说，又要引起领导的话，“女权主义在我这里不存在，因为我根本不关心这个问题。”同理，男人看女人的方式在我这里不存在，因为我无法那么看，我一向只能用女人的眼睛去看东西，它们给我的震撼和我的反应肯定也都是阴性的，每个女人的一生，都要被郁闷，慌张，恼怒和难以言表所困扰，但我决不是想当这个性别的代言人，因为，我已经遭遇了很多来自同性的攻击，我无法不仅仅代表自己发言。（…）

我不仇视男性，这决定了我成不了一个女权主义者（…）。

(Wu 2002: 385)

Shen Haobo – to quote the leader again – once said, “For me, feminism does not exist, because I’m not in the least bit interested in it”. Similarly, for me, men’s way of looking at women does not exist, because I can’t see things the way they do. I can always only see things through a woman’s eyes, and the impact those things have on me, as well as my responses, are definitely feminine. Every woman has had to put up with feelings of depression, confusion, anger and worries that are difficult to describe, but I don’t consider myself a spokeswoman for the female sex: since I have often been attacked and criticised by people of my sex, I cannot represent anyone but myself. （…）

I don’t look on men as enemies, and that means that I can never become a feminist（…）.

This short fragment shows clearly that the young poets remained untouched by the theoretical discussion on women’s poetry and feminism published in the very same issues of *Wings* in which their works appeared. Hence, the only “flight” metaphor for freedom from social constraints in Lower Body writing is associated with a narcotic “high”:

《起床后我就只想飞》

“On getting up all I want to do is fly”

我一整天顺着大街小巷走
 I spend the whole day walking around the city
 心里只有一个念头
 with only one idea in mind
 我想飞我想飞
 I want to fly I want to fly
 我想靠着栏杆飞
 Leaning against the railing I want to fly
 在天桥上飞
 On the overpass I want to fly
 只要今天让我飞一次
 All I want today is to be made to fly just once
 我愿意当着你们的面
 I am ready in front of you all
 脱光衣服
 to strip myself naked
 起床后我就只想抽大麻
 On getting up all I want to do is smoke weed
 (...)

(Wu 2000b: 73)

As a consequence, it is possible to claim that the discourse of women's poetry has remained relevant as a pivotal negative point of orientation for Lower Body female poets. It stands for past and current poetical practices rejected by them. Therefore, the majority of their poems should be read as written against the intellectual legacy of the body and language poetics which have defined the trajectory of women's poetry. No less importantly, their works do not show any affinity with Zhai Yongming's recent "female voice" poetics, due to their emotional detachment, refusal of the power implied by the concept of "representative voice", and their disavowal of the idea of "sisterhood". In other words, the main gender difference noticeable within the Lower Body text corpus is that, for the female members of the group, women's poetry was the main intellectual tradition in the negation of which they shaped their own literary identity. For the male members, women's poetry was simply not interesting enough and as such it never gained much relevance for them.

Yin Lichuan and Wu Ang's literary practice and their favoured self-representation as *femmes*

*fatales*⁷⁷ are nonetheless pertinent to the conceptual field of *jianghu*⁷⁸ or hooligan literature⁷⁹.

Yin's recognisability within the literary public rose after she had engaged in a written polemic with the Shanghai-based academic Ge Hongbing. In her thoroughly witty and often sarcastic essay "Aiguo, xing yayi ... yu wenxue" 爱国，性压抑……与文学 (Patriotism, sexual repression ... and literature, 2001: 244-253), Yin unfolds rhetorical skills which clearly demonstrate her elite education and erudition. She attacks Ge Hongbing for using hypocritical moral standards to evaluate modern authors respected by her, such as Lu Xun or Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986) to name but two. According to Yin, Ge's point of view does not differ essentially from the ideological puritanism of the Red Guards. In another essay, titled "Gei ge Youxi Guize Xian" 给个游戏规则先 (The gent who names the rules of the game, Ibid., 209-211), she polemicises with the critic Xie Youshun, whom she criticises heavily for the conservativeness of his top ten list of the best Chinese novels of the 1990s:

也就是说，我们的批评家表现得像领导，喜欢总结性发言，(…)完全漠视时代的变迁，漠视文学意义上的创新和探索，漠视文坛异类（例如王小波，王朔和早年的残雪），简言之，漠视文学的追求。(Yin 2001: 211)

In other words, our critic behaves like the leaders, he prefers to deliver overviews, (...) and is oblivious of the changing times, oblivious of the creativity and the explorative nature of literature. He is oblivious of the originality to be found within the literary scene (for example Wang Xiaobo, Wang Shuo and Can Xue in her early years). In short, he is oblivious of all that literature strives for.

Wu Ang similarly rejected the morally driven assessment of literature:

⁷⁷ Significantly in this context, Yin and Wu's visual representations remind one of Zizek's analysis of the changing image of the *femme fatale* in the film noir. While the original *femme fatale* remained an object for the projection of male fantasies about strong women, the (contemporary) neo-noir *femme fatale* destroys the spectral aura of the feminine mystery, openly tells the truth and deceives her partner. This, paradoxically, does not change the status of the male fantasy, and her actual transgression or perversion does not carry along any subversive power (Zizek 2000: 15-16).

⁷⁸ *Jianghu*, the literal translation of which is "rivers and lakes", is an allegedly untranslatable concept (Wu 2010: 2). It is connected with notions of movement which, by the time of the Qing dynasty, had gradually gained a pejorative connotation and as such was associated with hooliganism (流氓 *liumang*) (Dutton 2012: 130). In its numerous cultural manifestations *jianghu* emerged concomitantly as an important part of elite and popular culture. In the Ming novel *Shuihuzhuan* (Outlaws of the Marsh) *jianghu* materialised into a physical locality, a hiding place for those remaining outside the system of the law of the state. For more see Wu 2010 and Dutton 2012. In the context of the Lower Body, van Crevel translated *shi jianghu* as "poetry vagabonds" (2008: 331).

⁷⁹ Hooligan literature is most commonly used to refer to Wang Shuo's 王朔 (b. 1958) novels, which were published in the late 1990s and subsequently enjoyed great popularity during the 1990s. See Wang 1996: 261-286.

写作是独处时候的产品，如果谁独处时衣冠楚楚，没一点邪念和暧昧，没一点恶毒和毒辣，我可真要服了他。不错，作家最好人格高尚，但是作品为什么也要做一个贞洁牌？何况，作家又为什么要当传教士？(Wu 2000a: 123)

Writing is the product of seclusion. If someone is immaculately dressed even when alone, harbours no evil thoughts or equivocations, is without malice or acrimony, I'm really impressed. Not bad, it's best for a writer to be noble in character. But why should texts be treated as chastity archways? And why should writers have to serve as missionaries?

Primarily, these polemics shed additional light on the body writing discourse, as they show that the rejection of the Lower Body by Ge and Xie followed after an intense exchange of writings, which in its turn suggests that the critics' reaction might have been emotional and, as such, driven by affect or resentment. Secondly and more significantly, these polemics allow us to identify freedom of expression as the crucial value pursuit in the Lower Body *jianghu*. This strong emancipatory postulate was widely ignored by the Chinese critics, who consequently actually demonstrated the myopic inclination Yin accused them of.

Legacies of hooligan literature may easily be traced in Lower Body writings and performances, not only based on Yin's praise of Wang Shuo's cultural enterprise. Actually, these legacies deliver a more suitable interpretational frame for the poetry group undertakings than the notion of "lower class" mimicry posited by their critics, as the following quote addressing Wang's writing shows:

We can find no better landmark than Wang Shuo – a shadow and caricature of intellectuals – to draw the 1980s to an end. The decade has come to a full cycle, from the intellectuals' outrage against socialist alienation and their call for [a] return to humanism to the consecration of the fetish of a new kind of antihumanism that Wang Shuo's hooliganism crystallizes. (Wang 1996: 285)⁸⁰

Furthermore, the protagonists dwelling in the Lower Body's *jianghu* resemble those in Wang Shuo's oeuvre: pickpockets, drinkers, swindlers, grassroots entrepreneurs⁸¹ and sexist machos. They are the new mob, perfectly entitled to reside on the margins of elite society, but they are neither protesters nor rebels against official mainstream culture, they dream of leaving the margins behind:

⁸⁰ For more see Wang 1996: 261-287.

⁸¹ See Yu Hua 2012: 164.

《乡村的女孩》

“Country girl”⁸²

乡村的女孩

The girl's from the countryside

头发枯黄

her hair's yellow and dry

(…)

她到城里来

Once she's arrived in the city

碰到一个男人就想嫁给他

she wants to marry every man she happens to bump into

(…)

想在内衣里撒上香水

she'd like to spray her underwear with perfume

想坐上凉飕飕的小车

she'd like to get into a cool sleek car

离开店堂

and leave the shop

(…)

(Wu 2000c: 73)

Consequently, the Lower Body poets' *jianghu* remains an imaginary⁸³ one and the authors do not intent to turn it into a potential locus of subversion of the social order. This diminishes the protagonists in their poetry, and serves more to legitimise the poets' self-representation as bad boys and girls or outlaws of the literary scene than to function as an expression of their social concern. Furthermore, such an understanding corresponds well with the Lower Body's rejection of any limits imposed on speech or poetry on the one hand, and with their rejection of a public role as engaged intellectuals speaking for others.

⁸² The description of the young migrant worker provides a suitable example of the phenomena described by Lisa Rofel as “desiring China”. For more on female embodiments of the new desiring self see Rofel 2007: 111-135.

⁸³ According to Helena Wu's typology the “*imagined jianghu*” is defined thus: “[T]he portrayal of *jianghu* as a mode of the fantastic is heavily based on the blueprint of our earthly everyday life. For instance, *jianghu* is a common dwelling place accommodating different kinds of *jianghu* dwellers including monks, nuns, beggars, outlaws, vagrants, rascals, gangsters, knight-errants and anyone you can name. In this way, *jianghu* indeed embraces a strong sense of everydayness, ordinariness and mundanity” (Wu 2010: 4).

From the perspective of the trajectories of body writing in this millennium, the Lower Body may be perceived, to repeat the quotation from Wang, as bringing the literary decades of the 1980s and 1990s to an end. Wang could not have known, in 1996, that the antihumanist tendencies were to outlive the Wang Shuo phenomenon. Perhaps the what was most shocking in the pronouncements by Lower Body poets was their defence of the freedom of (poetic) expression, and, in the case of female members, their shaking off the feminist dilemma.⁸⁴

Feminine “somagrams”

According to the Chinese critics who coined the term “body writing”, apart from Lower Body poetry it is the Beauty Writers’ novels that most fully exemplify the nature of this allegedly new literary phenomenon. In their opinion, the most prominent traits of these literary works include nihilism, antihumanism, and western-inspired narrative patterns. These features eventually led to their classification as postmodern novels. The critics’ dismissive opinions were, in general, based on the evaluation of the frank descriptions of (mainly female) sexual desire or *jouissance*⁸⁵ included in these works which were widely received as controversial⁸⁶, even in spite of the contributions of gender identity-seeking women’s fiction and poetry since the late 1980s.⁸⁷

Strikingly, academics discussed Beauty Writers’ works as women’s writings, but at the same time, as a rule,⁸⁸ avoided linking these texts with the earlier feminine tradition. Body writing

⁸⁴ Which does not however change the fact that their anti-intellectual or post-feminist project did not offer a reasonable alternative or a way out. As the aforementioned quotations from Wu and the reactions to Yin’s movies show, they were troubled by the same predicaments which marked the earlier discussion of women’s writing.

⁸⁵ “It is [...] a word with simultaneously sexual, political, and economic overtones. Total access, total participation, as well as total ecstasy are implied”. (Cixous & Clément 2008: 160)

⁸⁶ It may be assumed that the graphic depictions of men’s sexual activities by male Lower Body poets were not regarded as equally scandalous, which shows that such descriptions are perceived as far more “natural” and, as such, less taboo-breaking. Gender-biased critics prefer to quote from Yin Lichuan’s poems, while in the case of Shen Haobo they engage in a discussion on his Lower Body manifesto.

⁸⁷ Women’s literature of the 1990s was largely understood as being anchored in the gendered writing subject’s authentic experience. Fictional works by Lin Bai or Chen Ran, along with early lyrical creations by Zhai Yongming or Yin Lei, were scrutinised and identified as genuinely representing their intimate privacy. At the same time, critics focused on analysing the recurring themes in feminine literature (such as narcissism, escapism and homoeroticism) in relation to the presumed autobiographical features. Consequently, a critique in moral terms emerged, stigmatising some of the texts (*A War with Oneself* by Lin Bai being the most prominent example) as soft pornography.

⁸⁸ In Chapter 2 I discussed the exceptions: Xie Youshun’s and Chen Xiaoming’s linking of Wei Hui’s novel

was treated as a malicious tumour on the healthy corpus of Chinese literature, with which it was not to be associated.

“Wo hai xiang zenme ne?” 我还想怎么办呢? (Of what more do I think?) is the title of Wei Hui’s essay which was published in the literary magazine *Writers* in 1998. Two years prior to the scandalous ban of *Shanghai Baby* the author simply declared the following:

我必须承认， 在世纪末的中国做一个女作家是一件很幸运的事。(Wei 1998b: 25)

I have to admit that it is a very fortunate matter to be a woman writer in fin de siècle China.

Wei does not explain any further, but it has often been stressed that her self-representation as an author is an important feature of her works.⁸⁹ The metanarrative on the process of writing is likewise ever-present in her most popular novel *Shanghai Baby*. In the above-mentioned essay and similarly in her other works, the foregrounding of the creative process is not connected to the discourse of writing as an empowering emancipatory force, as it would be the case of *écriture féminine*. Rather, it creates the opportunity to become an unconventional (*linglei*) subject, which is Wei Hui’s primary self-identification:

我和那些模特、歌手、发型师、画家、经纪人、无所事事的 PUNK、秃头的金融分析家一样，是吃着城市最前卫的秘密生存的一种小虫。(Ibid.)

Along with models, singers, hair stylists, painters, managers, idle punks and bald financial analysts, I am a small bug feeding on this city’s most avant-garde secret existence.

This unconventional urban crowd can be perceived as having a similar function to that of the Lower Body’s *jianghu* but, significantly, the *linglei*-identification is based to on a very different forming principle, namely that of extraordinariness. This exclusive club of unconventional characters is built upon an elusive distinction, that of taste. The pursuit of a highly aestheticised and deeply emotional mode of living is accompanied by a no less intense desire for purely material status symbols. Consequently, the *linglei*-identification is more exclusive than that with the “vagabonds”. Another similarity with the Lower Body enterprise can be found in Wei Hui’s rewriting of the role of the author as closely linked to a creative segment of the city’s population not heretofore represented in literature. As someone whose existence is grounded on self-expression, the writer speaks mainly for and about herself, leaving aside the question of speaking for others.

with two other women writers from Shanghai, Zhai Ailing and Wang Anyi.

⁸⁹ See for example Shi 2003, pp. 157-161 and Zhu 2007: pp. 114-119.

Wei's writing and self-representation may be intentioned as unconventional and anti-establishment but, in contrast to the Lower Body, she does not strike an anti-intellectual pose. On the contrary, her texts abound in intertextual allusions, she experiments simultaneously with different modes of narration and admits eagerly that writing is the result of intense formal and informal training. The short story "Scream of a Butterfly" published in *Writers* (1998: 6-24) reveals an already well-formed set of personalised textual components that subsequently defined the recognisable layout of her literary imaginary as well as her writing style.

The first-person narrator of the novel is a beautiful young actress who introduces herself to the reader immediately before putting an end to a five-year relationship with her boyfriend, a mediocre entrepreneur. She presents herself as follows:

在一些 PARTY 上照例把自己打扮成荧光美女的模样，跳舞喝酒，有时还朗诵某位地下诗人充满达达主义风格的诗歌。我开始被冠以另类女人、行为艺术家的时髦符号。(Wei 1998a: 7)

At parties I usually styled myself as a fluorescent beauty, I danced and drank, sometimes I recited dada-like poems by some underground poet. Gradually, I got a fashionable name as an unconventional woman and performance artist.

She meets her partner in a dim bar filled with stylish crowds and loud grunge music. After having sex with her ex-boyfriend-to-be in the club's lavatory (another scene that Wei Hui introduced repeatedly in several of her texts), she encounters the second female character of the novel, a young "punk" on the run from home called Zhudi. In what follows, the first-person narrator retells Zhudi's unhappy love affair with a rising rock musician in parallel to her own story.

The narration includes all the "symptoms" or signifiers of postmodern body writing as defined by Ge & Song; the gloomy bars, the loud music, or in other words, the deprecated aesthetics of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. The critics have, however, often remained myopic to the modernist (not postmodern) inclinations inherent in Wei Hui's fiction as also to its affinity with the traditional and feminine literary imagery.

It is significant that nearly all the metaphors understood as typical within the context of feminine tradition in writing can be found in Wei's texts. She often associates femininity with images of darkness and death, which play an important role in her short stories together with opulent mirror and dream imagery. The canon of feminine beauty to which her stories subscribe echoes the stereotyped representations of the female body in Chinese tradition. She

does not critically question the representations of slender-handed, slim, gracefully weak, long-haired femininity. Hence, even if they masquerade as punk, the women in her stories are simply beautiful. The only meaningful difference is the unrestrained expression of unveiled female sexual desire, through which women in her fiction gain the opportunity to objectify men in the same way as they are objectified by them. Perhaps it is exactly this eradication of gender difference within the sexual sphere that led to the controversies over *Shanghai Baby*. Wei Hui's representation of femininity, even if sexually emancipated, remains nevertheless unchangeably enmeshed in various (in this case often de-naturalising "unconventional") beauty regimes. Consequently, her broadening of sexual citizenship for women has not led to further and more general questioning of female role models or mainstream representations of femininity. Her only suggestion for hip female urbanity is that of sexual emancipation, but only as another distinction separating the class of unconventional women from that of run-of-the-mill women.

In the aforementioned essay, Wei Hui identifies herself, together with her friends, as "the only romantic flowers of evil in this city" (我们是这城市唯一浪漫的恶之花 *women shi zhe chengshi weiyi langman de e zhi hua*). When they were first published in 1857, Charles Baudelaire's poems were accused of insulting public decency, a description that corresponds well with Wei Hui's understanding of the meaning of being "unconventional". The short story "Scream of a Butterfly" may be read as a catalogue of further – not only literary – identifications and quotations: Nirvana's music, Oscar Wilde's epigrams and Sylvia Plath's poetry melt in Wei's writing-pot together with allusions to Zhang Ailing's stories and legacies of 1930s Shanghai.

In this particular novella, however, Wei seems to be experimenting with the psychoanalytic approach to storytelling. Consequently, seen from this perspective the younger Zhudi may be read as the more mature narrator's alter ego. Zhudi's strong sense of alienation and her inclination towards auto-aggression are depicted as symptoms of the "haunting of the transgenerational phantom" (Abraham & Torok 1994: 165-187). She belongs to the generation of the children of the so-called educated youth (知青 *zhiqing*), i.e. of those who took part in the Cultural Revolution,

她认识的人当中有不少也是像她那样单身在沪的知青子弟，她称他们是问题小狗 (...) (Ibid., 9)

Many of the people she knew were children of the *zhiqing* who, like her, lived on their own in Shanghai. She called them "problem pups" (...)

我说你是一个从小没有父母管教的野孩子，这令人同情但却不是你随地撒野的理由，你现在对生活态度恶劣对你自己麻木不仁，你是一个以破坏为动力的坏 PUNK，你是这个城市里众多下乡知青的下一代中的败类 (...) (Ibid., 20)

[I] told her she was a wild child who'd grown up without parental guidance. This made people sympathise with her, but was no reason for her to behave atrociously everywhere. [I told her] that her current attitude towards life was vile, that she was insensitive towards herself, that she was a punk acting out of destructive impulses, that she was one of the many degenerates in the city's generation of *zhiquing* offspring. (...)

Apart from the introspective and psychoanalysing approach, the mode of narration in this story remains rather conventional. Even if the ending is open and there are some intentionally blank spots, the narrative does not reach beyond the standard pattern of an unhappy adolescent love story. In the end Zhudi, left pregnant by her unfaithful boyfriend, disappears from view and the narrator intentionally blurs the borders between reality and fiction – another typical feature of Wei Hui's writing repertoire. In the closing paragraph, the first-person narrator brings the focus back to herself, reminding the reader that she is the author. As in a theatre she comes back on stage, well prepared to interact with her readership:

我想我是不是在二十五岁的时候已经老去了因为我太喜欢回忆。当然动人的回忆可以促使一个女孩变成个女作家，所以我写出这个不太长的真假难辨的 Fucking 故事。如果有人看到与这个故事里的朱迪很像的女孩，请一定与我联系。记住地址是上海松花江路 2500 号，“蝴蝶与玫瑰”花店。(Wei 1998: 24)

I wonder if, at twenty-five, I have already got old, since I love recalling past events. Of course, moving memories may prompt a girl to become a woman writer, so I wrote this not very long fucking story, in which truth and fiction are hard to tell apart. If anybody sees a girl who looks like the Zhudi of this story, please contact me. The address: is Shanghai, Songhua Jiang Street 2500, "Butterflies and Roses" flower shop.

The roses in the name of the shop mentioned in the last line may be traced back to Zhang Ailing's story "Red Rose and White Rose" (Hong meigui bai meigui 红玫瑰白玫瑰, 1944). The first-person narrator compares herself to a red rose, standing for the passionate lover in Zhang's story. Wei apparently identifies with the traditional representation of femininity, even if it is a besieged femininity in permanent crisis as in Zhang's fiction. Consequently, she does not further explore the possibilities hidden in the gender-indifferent and socially more subversive Baudelairian flowers of evil imagery.

The other organising principle noticeable in numerous of Wei Hui's writings is that of the strange or extraordinary. This notion allows her works to be linked not only with gothic

fiction⁹⁰ but at the same time with the short story in the classical language, *chuanqi*. “Shui zhong de chunü” 水中的处女 (“Virgin in the Water”, 1997) is a short story by Wei that conforms to the definition of the *chuanqi* as reporting “weird or unusual love affairs” and “leaning towards the supernatural” (Idema & Haft, 1997: 135). The third-person narrator introduces the story of the painter who wants to finish a portrait of the mysterious woman⁹¹ whose acquaintance he accidentally made in a bar:

她的身体仿佛缺少钙质，柔若无骨，在浴缸里可以揉成千姿百态的形状。

(Wei 2000: 52)

It was as if her body was short of calcium, it was soft as soap, in the bath it could knead itself into all kinds of different postures.

The woman used to come to his studio every weekend to model in the nude in a bathtub filled with water. After she disappeared, the picture remained unfinished, and the artist left the town on a journey. When he got back home, he discovered that the woman’s face had been destroyed by rats and instantly he felt as if the women had stabbed him in the neck. As a result, he removed her face from the picture. Later, he thought he saw the same woman in the bar again, but she denied that she knew him. Nevertheless, the painter managed to persuade her to model for him.

画家后来完成了一幅名为《水中的处女》的画，那画上的女人具有一种奇异的美，聚集了关于欲望和死亡的所有想象，令人捉摸不透的是女人的右手手腕上留着一道深深的痕迹。他连续开了几次个人画展，从报上得来的消息，如今的他已移民法国。而那个女人，有多种传言，有人说她早已自杀，她被发现赤体地躺在浴缸里，手腕上留着一个吓人的伤口，像小孩哭泣时的嘴。也有人说她也去了法国，她的诗集在法国出乎意料地畅销。记住，只是一个故事。(Ibid.: 57)

Afterwards the painter painted the picture known as “Virgin in the Water”. The woman in the picture had a strange kind of beauty that encompassed every fantasy of desire and death. What puzzled people were the deep scars on the woman’s right wrist. He held several one-man exhibitions one after the other, and according to the newspapers he has now emigrated to France. As to the woman, there are a lot of rumours about her. Some say she committed suicide, that she was found naked in the bath with, on her wrist, a terrifying scar shaped like the mouth of a crying child. Others say she also went to France and that her collected poems have sold unexpectedly well there.

Remember, it’s only a story.

Even a brief overview of Wei Hui’s fiction shows the alleged freshness and transgressive

⁹⁰ An observation made by Katarzyna Ancuta, personal conversation in Zurich 2011.

⁹¹ For more on connections between ghosts and female portraits in classical fiction see Zeitlin 2005.

nature of her body writing to be questionable. The same may be stated with regard to the dubious identification of her fiction as postmodern. At least, apart from a rewriting of already known narratives, they do not bear any traces of irony, pastiche or playfulness, which are important features of postmodern aesthetics. The general impression left by Wei's stories is, rather, that of being allowed a glance into the intimacy of a maturing writer's workshop. Her earlier literary exercises trying out various modes of Western and Chinese narration lead directly to the justified classification of the scandalous *Shanghai Baby* as an attempt at *écriture féminine chinoise*⁹². Various understandings of feminism belong to the cultural backpack of the well-educated urban middle classes, of which Wei Hui is an obvious member. Consequently, there is nothing particularly astonishing in the incorporation of the feminist legacies into the body of her fiction. This does not necessarily change her writings into a feminist manifesto. Furthermore, the crucial issue for Wei Hui, as the closing paragraphs of the two aforementioned short stories reveal, is her wish to maintain control over storytelling and reception processes. That would make her rather sceptical of voluntarily subscribing to any ideological grand narration with its logical consequences of power negotiations and compromises within the field of artistic freedom.

Wei Hui's writing sheds light on only one aspect of her appropriation of the concept of authorship. Her re-writing of the role of the female author may be understood as the main aim of her public performances. In the title of this chapter I have proposed to refer to Wei Hui's texts as "somagrams". The literary critic Catharine Stimpson first used this term in her article on (self-) representations of the poet Gertrude Stein (1985). She argues that Stein's queer corporeality, which was incompatible with accepted standards of feminine beauty and heterosexuality, could not be ignored by the readership. It represented a challenge to the recipients, one which resembles that of Wei Hui's unconventional self-staging of female authorship. Consequently, the reactions to Stein and Wei Hui's writing may be seen as concomitantly responding to their texts, as well as, to their "beyond the norm" appearances. Stimpson does not propose an exact definition of the term, but, according to her, somagram shall be understood as writing about bodies, which is inseparable from the corporeality of the writing subject; it is the textualised body: "[b]ut when we represent the body, we must transmute our dwelling [in the body] into a ghost-ridden, ghost-written language. Soma must become a somagram. The somagrams of Gertrude Stein – hers and ours about her – illustrate this well-worn axiom. They reveal something else as well: attempts – hers and ours – to fix

⁹² This term was introduced by Tani E. Barlow (1996) who referred in this way to Chen Ran's texts.

monstrous qualities of the female body” (Stimpson 1985: 67).

In case of Wei Hui, even if her flawed textual somagrams do not significantly transgress the feminine tradition of the privatised writing of the 1990s and, in addition, lack originality, her attempts to redefine the notion of authorship with the help of the global mass media deserve attention. Significantly, her self-representation as a sexy popular and, at the same time, independent brainy young woman could not be sustained for long. She entirely lost control over her performance, which was perceived by the public as too transitory to be smoothly coopted into the popular imagery without challenging the already established and more conservative representations of women: e.g. the intellectual “no-body” female author, the shy debutant writer or else dangerous female sexuality free of family bonds. The final ban of *Shanghai Baby* eventually marked the victory of other people’s somagrams on Wei Hui over her own. They eventually stabilised the aporetic qualities of her performance of feminine authorship as pornographic.⁹³ In the second of his poems dedicated to the so-called Wei Hui phenomenon, Shen Haobo ironically reflects the hypocrisy inherent to this process of rejection:

(...)

一个二十来岁的上海女作家

A twenty-something woman writer from Shanghai

人也长得漂亮

who happens to be beautiful

被媒体称做

has been named by the media

美女作家

the beautiful woman writer

(...)

这些传闻是否属实

Whether these rumours are true or not

目前并无确定

is impossible to determine just now

但可以肯定的是

but what we can be sure of is

这些段子

⁹³ On the process of “pornographizing” *Shanghai Baby* along with its author see Zhu 2007: 140-151.

that in so-called intellectual circles
 在所谓的文化圈子里
 these snippets
 正传得沸沸扬扬
 are spreading like wildfire
 (...)

而当这些仁兄们
 And when these dear friends'
 过完嘴瘾
 appetite has been sated
 马上又对卫慧的行径
 they hasten to react to Wei Hui's conduct
 表现出足够的
 with adequate
 蔑视和愤怒
 contempt and indignation
 有人痛心疾首
 Some are bitter and resentful
 有人冷嘲热讽
 others are biting sarcasm
 (Shen 2000)⁹⁴

Although Wei Hui and the Lower Body writers have a similar reputation for shocking the public, it is difficult to find common textual features definitive enough to justify grouping them under the singular label of “body writing”. Their apparent similarities can only be found in the reception of their public appearances by the popular media – but with the significant difference that the reception of the Lower Body poetry was far more restricted, appealing mainly to intellectual and literary circles. Accordingly, “body writing” must be regarded as a discursive phenomenon which gained relevance primarily in the sphere of reception of literary production and not necessarily because of distinct textual features. “Wei Hui’s body writing” was a multi-faceted concept, formed primarily by her public performances and the reactions to them, in addition to the evaluation of the textual features of the one novel, *Shanghai Baby*, while her other texts having been widely neglected. In contrast, the scandal of the Lower

⁹⁴ For an alternative English translation of the entire poem see Zhu 2007: 150-151.

Body clearly arose from their literary texts with their deliberate anti-intellectual macho-sexist message. Interestingly, the Beauty Writers as well as the Lower Body drew on rich literary resources from the 1990s. The Lower Body's imaginary "poetry *jianghu*" is rooted within the anti-intellectual and antihumanist hooligan tradition, while Wei Hui's writing may be re-connected with academic women writers' privatised writing from the 1990s. Consequently, their works, with their sharp focus on middle-class urbanities and various subcultures inhabiting the cityscape, bring about a climate of intensity and, simultaneously, bring to closure a certain period in contemporary literature understood as part of the socio-cultural scenery. On the other hand, their acting-out of a less elite-oriented notion of authorship may be regarded as preparing the ground for the shifts within the body writing discourse that occurred after the turn of the century.

Writing the bodies of others

Early in 2001 the poet and critic Ma Ce 马策 (b. 1966) published in *Lotus* a vehement critique of the Lower Body's literary enterprise, in which he "[...] warns that the Lower Body's predilection for profanities is pushing poetry towards the abyss of hedonism" (translated in van Crevel 2008: 332). Three years later the same author acclaimed Sheng Keyi's (b. 1976) debut novel *Beimei* 北妹 (Northern Girls) in the following words:

“身体写作”在中国语境中最少涉及到两种相互纠结的情形：其一是反抗男权中心话语霸权对女性意识的遮蔽，从而还原女性自我，介入历史建构；其二是欲望化快乐叙事对消费时代观看的迎合。自20世纪90年代以来，身体文本的实绩充分表明了这一路写作的胜利。但我谈论盛可以小说《北妹》，却不仅是为这个实绩寻找一个最新的佐证。《北妹》事涉身体的自由秩序，但更为重要的是揭示出身体自由的危机。透过盛可以穿透女性身体、穿透人性的笔力，中国女性写作已经发生了深刻的质变——
到此为止，所谓个人化私小说、半自传身体爆料和放荡扮酷的“美女作家”时代全面结束了。(Ma 2004: 4)

In the Chinese context, "body writing" is connected to at least two interrelated phenomena. Firstly, to the resistance against the hegemony of the phallogentric discourse that obstructed feminine consciousness and the subsequent return of the female self into history. Secondly, with its narrations of joyful desire it caters to the tastes of consumer society. Since the 1990s, the success of the corporeal texts has represented the victory of this kind of writing. My discussion of Sheng Keyi's novel "Beimei" does not however aim at presenting new proofs of this victory. "Beimei" touches upon emancipatory body regimes, but, more importantly, it reveals the dangerous nature of corporeal freedom. By means of Sheng Keyi's vigorous writing, which examines female bodies and human nature, Chinese women's writing has undergone a deep transformation. To sum up, the "Beauty Writers" era of so-called privatised novels, semi-autobiographical exposures and dissolution masked as "cool" has come to an

end.

Ma Ce's introduction to the novel does not diverge significantly from the sociological or Marxist approach to literature (and especially to the body writing phenomenon) to be found in the majority of critical texts. In the end, Ma decodes the novel as an allegory, and simultaneously, veiled critique of economic features inherent to the Western model of neo-liberal capitalism. Leaving aside an assessment of this as a problematic reading, it must nevertheless be agreed that the alarming but simultaneously fresh nature of this novel is worth inquiring into. Furthermore, it may be perceived as marking a general turn within the literary discourse in general and not restricted to body writing alone.

The "body writ large" (see Chapter 2), which emerged in the post-Maoist literature of the so-called newborn generation, was symptomatic for the overcoming of revolutionary aesthetics with its standardised representations of human bodies as a signifier of class distinction. Additionally, it was an acknowledgment of the fact that the writing subject is an embodied one. The body was recognised as a new space waiting for post-revolutionary re-signification, and soon it became the battleground on which renderings of masculinity and femininity were re-negotiated. The re-somatisation of literary texts may be seen as a fragment of a more general cultural transition, which was described by intellectuals as "bidding farewell to the revolution".⁹⁵ As a consequence, both the literary and artistic production of the 1980s and 1990s to a great extent said farewell to the revolutionary worker-and-peasant's body proper. According to Dai Jinhua, the visible signs of this development are the following:

The images of women during the 1990s are two extremes: the hysterical, unreasonable woman and the committed, serious woman who is willing to endure humiliation in order to carry out an important mission. In both women's writing and men's writing we can discover many works with an active woman's consciousness and consciousness of resistance. However, we can say categorically that these works are all about the survival of urban, middle-class or quasi-middle-class, intellectual women (or at least women with some characteristics of the typical intellectual woman). Writers of these works and their female protagonists never focus on women of the lower classes, much less identify with them.

(Dai 2004: 296)

Subsequently, the gradual concealment of the working-class body accompanied the exposure of that of the individual intellectual. This tendency was never largely questioned throughout the 1990s, but in the twenty-first century the exclusion of the former proletariat from the

⁹⁵ See Dai 2004, Karl 2009.

literary field took a different turn and the former worker turned up again as the disenfranchised citizen. He represents not only the social reality of globalising economics, but much more stands for the incommensurability of the different aspects inherent to the post-Cold War era, for the expression of which an artistic language has yet to be found. Chen Xiaoming's inquiry into the re-appropriation of the "hardship" theme by contemporary authors is among the earliest responses to this phenomenon:

“困难”是历史与阶级意识的集中体现，它反映了文学依然具有社会历史意识，同时是在阶级冲突的潜意识中被表达的。在阶级斗争激烈的年代，激进革命通过诉诸阶级矛盾来找到阶级斗争的动力；现在，阶级斗争无疑已经弱化，新生的资产阶级与原来农民阶级和无产阶级的矛盾又成为新的历史时期矛盾。但这种矛盾与现行社会的权威意识形态话语不能找到恰当的表达话语，也就是不能被其认定的社会性质所接纳。社会主义社会是人民当家作主，不可能出现受苦难的阶级，特别是原来的工人阶级和农民阶级 (...). (Chen 2009: 341)⁹⁶

"Hardship" is a reflection of the convergence of historic circumstances and class consciousness, it shows that literature is still aware of social history. Furthermore, it is expressed with the subconscious awareness of the ongoing class struggle. In the era of intense class struggle, the radical revolutionary spirit gained its impetus through appealing to class contradictions. Currently, class struggle has doubtlessly lost much of this impetus. The contradictions between the new bourgeoisie on the one hand and the original peasant class and proletariat on the other have become the contradictions of a new historical period. But such contradictions cannot find appropriate expression within the hegemonic ideological discourse of current society. That means they cannot be absorbed by the social fabric from which they originate. In a socialist society it is the people who rule, so there can't be a class that suffers misery, and particularly not the former workers' or peasants' class (...).

Chen concluded that writers reacted to the changing social reality with a search for new means of aesthetic expression. The turn to the body and to privacy had been revealed as inadequate to fulfill the task of overcoming the legacy of socio-realistic aesthetics, as it simply rendered the once hegemonic bodies invisible. These bodies re-enter the intellectuals' writings in the course of a renewed investigation into realistic modes of expression:

回到现实主义，是因为它无力走出它；而走出现实主义则是因为现实主义无力提供有活力的机制。借助现实主义，然而想方设法脱身——这就形成了当下小说艺术表现方面的审美脱身术。(Ibid.: 341-342)

The return to realism is based on the [aesthetic project's] powerlessness to abandon it, while the retreat from realism originates from the incapacity of realism to provide dynamic

⁹⁶ Chen discusses the revision of the "hardship" theme (2009: 340-341) in intellectuals' writing in a chapter dedicated to the budding 后人民性 *hou renminxing* (post-people-ness) sentiments in literature. He explains this phenomenon in connection with the current intellectual search for new subject positionalities, different from the previous mass- or humanistic-oriented ones, and representing the emerging "post-humanistic subjectivity" (Riemenschnitter 2011: 441).

mechanisms. Drawing support from realism and then trying every means to get away from it – that is what shaped the aesthetic escapism which is a facet of contemporary novelistic expression.

Sheng Keyi's first novel *Northern Girls* delivers a suitable example of this writing strategy.⁹⁷ According to the author, while working on the book she was aiming at the following:

写卑微人物的生存境遇，表现一个平凡女性的坚韧的生命意志。(e-mail exchange, 2010)
To describe the living circumstances of humble characters and represent an ordinary woman's tenacious lust for life.

Accordingly, the novel deals with the topic of the floating population living on the outskirts of the key sites of economically “rising China”. Sheng endows the main protagonist of the story, the 16-year-old girl Qian Xiaohong 钱小红, with a pair of large, voluptuous breasts and a strong sense of agency that originates at least in part from her corporeal capital. The narrative follows her on her way from one occupation to another and from one partner to the next. Simultaneously, the novel explores the bonds of friendship between working sisters⁹⁸ and the broader social environment in which they struggle to make ends meet. The novel does not eschew frank depictions of violence and intimacy, and the omnipresent fleshly rhetoric of the text legitimises its assignment by Ma Ce to the literary body discourse. The realistic mode of narration is, however, subverted by the grotesque nature of Qian's breasts, which grow bigger throughout the novel to the point of becoming a monstrous appendage which eventually expels the heroine from human society. This strategic avoidance or transgression of realism is fulfilled in the closing scene of the novel:

她吃力地用双手先把左边的乳房抱下来，在把右边的乳房抱下来，忽然身体失去了平衡，随着右乳房的重量倾斜，钱小红跌到在地，压在自己的乳房下。她紧握着栏杆试图站起来，像个被打到在地的拳击手，一次，二次……乳房就像钉在了水泥地里（…）。

⁹⁷ Shaffer and Song equate this novel with ethnographic research in fictional form, defining it as a realistic novel with a “deft touch of magic realism” (2014: 66-67). This mimetic-magic reading seems narrow and as such not satisfactory, while the perspective sketched by Chen at least lends justice to the ideological and historical entanglements of artistic representations of workers' bodies. It must however be mentioned here that Chen only discusses stories by intellectuals who speak for others, while Sheng Keyi, who could be considered a professional writer now, based this novel on her own experience as a migrant worker of rural origin.

⁹⁸ The term *dagongmei* 打工妹 or “working sister” is often thought to be a neologism invented in post-socialist China. In fact the term was already in use in the late nineteenth century, however primarily within the confines of Guangdong City. See Chi Zhihua 1999. The term refers today to women migrant labourers from the countryside. See Jacka 1998, Pun Ngai 1999.

她咬着牙，低着头，拖着两袋泥沙一样的乳房，爬出了脚的包围圈，爬下了天桥，爬进了拥挤的街道。（Sheng 2004: 248）

She laboured, using her hands to lift first her left, then her right breast. Suddenly, she lost her balance, tilting under the weight of her right breast. She fell to the ground under the weight of her own bust. She clasped the railing trying to stand up, like a defeated boxer pulling himself up from the ground, one, two... It was like her breasts were cemented to the ground (...).

Gritting her teeth, she bent her head and, pulling the two breasts like sandbags, she crawled out of the ring of encirclement made of pedestrians' feet, she crawled down from the pedestrian bridge and crawled onto the busy streets.⁹⁹

Secrets of class abjection¹⁰⁰

Northern Girls brings into focus the topic of the non-intellectual's gendered corporeality, which was largely absent in the myopic privatised writing, or body writing, of the 1990s. It has nevertheless to be acknowledged here that the former peasants and workers had not entirely disappeared from view, and since the late 1980s they have been gradually incorporated into the repository of the narratives of post-Deng China explored by the mass media and popular culture alike. The former female peasants and workers emerged on television screens in the mid-1980s as working sisters to become a novel object of interest in popular film and television dramas.¹⁰¹ The narratives focused mainly on the propagation of an individual identity-project for the female migrant worker aimed at raising her low rural *suzhi*/quality¹⁰² through learning, self-investment, and eventual adjustment to the codes of urban behaviour. Those women who were ambitious and patient enough to endure various forms of suffering (吃苦 *chiku*), might finally be rewarded with a happy marriage or, alternatively, an opportunity to settle down in the city. These popular narratives not only shifted the full responsibility for personal success on to the rural women themselves, but moreover, in terms of gender, they reinforced traditional standards of feminine beauty, modesty, tenderness, loyalty, submissiveness, etc. This representative strategy exemplifies the tendencies identified by Dai Jinhua in popular culture as far as the interplay between class and gender is considered:

⁹⁹ English translation amended in order to remain as close to the original text as possible. Unless otherwise stated, quotations follow exactly Bryant's translation published as *Northern Girls. Life Goes On*.

¹⁰⁰ See Chow 2002: 128-153.

¹⁰¹ For example in the movies *Huangshan laide guniang* (A girl from the Huangshan Mountains, 1983), *Ezi* 1988 and in the TV drama *Wailaimei* (Sisters from outside, 1991).

¹⁰² For more on *suzhi* as a core theme of the floating population discourse see Yan 2003: 493-523; Anagnost 2004: 189-208; Jacka 2006: 64-67 and Kipnis 2007.

“Girls from the outside” is a term that “resonates” with the rural migrant workers (...). A relatively widespread social problem was confined to the special circumstances experienced by a particular gender, and thus, in the picture of progress based on capitalist history, the problem could be described or interpreted as “a process” or “labor pains.” The compassion and pity of “great humanism” could be invoked to divert people’s attention from the harsh reality. (Dai 2004: 297-298)

In Chen’s opinion (2008: 346), in the recent upsurge of writings on the disenfranchised, another tendency may be recognised, apart from the pitiful perspective of romanticising (浪漫气息 *langman qixi*) the ways of living of “the others”. In general, he claims that the literary representation of the new peasants and workers after the turn of the century might be re-connected with the realistic tradition of the May Fourth Movement, an observation which would be relevant also with regard to the more popular renderings of the topic. Rey Chow argues that, in the majority of these modern narrations, class distinction remains clear and is not crossed (1994: 245). *Northern Girls* basically fits into this overall description, but it introduces different gate-keeping mechanisms, which do not fit in with the idea of sacrifice described by Chow:

Where a lower-class person’s conduct may, in fact, threaten to overthrow the moral structure that holds a society together, literature often makes her part of the very support, the very boundary of that structure, by glorifying her. Central to such glorification in the case of lower-class women is a prohibition of their sexuality. We thus have countless women characters who are “admirable” because they live their lives as self-sacrificing motherly servants with little sexuality and subjectivity. (1994: 245)

Drawing on Chow’s vocabulary, Qian Xiaohong’s problems may be accordingly identified as originating from her sexuality and subjectivity, the sacrifice of which she rejects from the very beginning. Her eventual failure exposes the fact that for the lower class woman the alternative to being fixed as a “boundary” and, simultaneously, a warrant of the current social order, is the impossible subject position of threatening monstrosity. She becomes the one for whom society does not yet have a name:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from the exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (Kristeva 1982: 1)

The corporeal poetics of *Northern Girls* brims with frank descriptions of sexual intimacy,

which often thematise *jouissance* and female sexual agency and, consequently, bear a resemblance to women's writing and body writing. The similarity stops, however, where the text zooms in on sexual behaviour in order to reveal the power relations always inscribed into it, a textual strategy omnipresent in Sheng Keyi's novel. Full sexual citizenship and agency was renegotiated by and for female intellectuals in the 1990s, but the notion of citizenship is not one which may be applicable to the working sisters. This is a fact which Qian acknowledges in the process of gradually abandoning her initial naivety and her belief that she may one day have an equal part in "desiring China":

'Hey Honghong, when we've made a bit of money, I want to buy a whole load of beautiful clothes. What we've got on now screams 'country bumpkin'. You think we'll get laughed at in Shenzhen?' Sijiang moved a little closer to Xiaohong as she spoke.

'We've got to wash tons of scalps first but then there'll be plenty of new clothes, plenty of good food and plenty of men to choose from too,' Xiaohong drawled, chattering idly. (Sheng, transl. by Bryant 2012: 28)

But even before she finally realises that, because she does not belong to the class whose dreams are identified as having priority over others, her dreams will never be fulfilled, she becomes painfully conscious of the fact that she is being abjected not only by the urbanites, but also by the villagers in her native place and by her own family:

Her father ate, feeling depressed, mostly because Xiaohong was leaving next day, but also because everyone in the village thought his daughter was a prostitute in Shenzhen. He had lost face. (Ibid.: 187)

Exactly the same thing happens to her best friend, Sijiang:

'Ah Hong, I gave my family three thousand yuan – nearly half a year's salary – and they turned on me really savagely. Once I'd put it into my dad's hands, he really laid into me. I'm just a piece of crap, completely worthless!' (Ibid.: 190)

Here it becomes clear that the imaginary integrity of both rural and urban identities is preserved by abjecting border crossers. The working sisters find themselves out of place wherever they go. Furthermore, paradoxically, in this way they are forced back into the role of "boundary stabilisers" which is grounded not on their glorification – which was only on offer as a reward for accepting and subordinating oneself to the sacrifice narrative as described by Chow – but on their repulsion. Only loathing may reduce the threat of the unstabilising impact of the improper. Eventually, abjection is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4). In

Sheng's novel it is the main protagonist Qian Xiaohong who embodies this disrespect for social boundaries:

'Are you going to hate me if I don't marry you?' Liao seemed poised for a long conversation.
 'Why would I hate you? The thought hadn't crossed my mind.'
 'Then don't you feel like you're losing out?'
 'Losing out? I never thought of it like that. It's not like you forced me.'
 'You're a girl. It's always to your disadvantage if someone does you.'
 'If I remember correctly, I've always been on the top.'
 'But it's still me doing you. I just did it more pleasantly.'
 'It pleased me too. I didn't do it as a service to you.'
 (...)

'If all women thought like this, wouldn't the world be a mess? All hell would break loose.'
 Logically, Xiaohong was the ideal partner for anyone to get along with, since she had no ideological baggage. But Liao felt awkward and this affected his thinking.
 'It would be more balanced. Otherwise, it's only women's worlds that are a mess. (...)
 Liao was afraid Xiaohong hadn't got it. Despite her ideological work [in a hospital's propaganda department], he'd never imagined she'd start lecturing him. In all honesty, he thought that being involved with a girl like Xiaohong would save some trouble. He never actually thought about marrying a migrant working sister, without a job, residency permits or diplomas. (Ibid.: 231-232, translation modified)

At this point, however, Xiaohong has fully realised that apart from the occasional fulfillment of her bodily desires, other parts of her identity-project will never advance towards the happy end promised by the narrative of self-development. The girl actually never thought that Liao, an educated policeman, could have intended to marry her. The trouble with Xiaohong is that she does not hide her disillusionment with the working sister identity. She rejects the word "love", and her veto may be read as symbolising a repudiation of any attempts to romanticise her uneasy position.

Sheng's novel shows how the abjection of working sisters serves the satisfaction of desires and fulfillment of dreams of villagers and townspeople alike. Both groups profit daily from the endless forms of capitalisation of girls' bodies transformed into a commodity or labour force by the market. In general, these young women are culturally obliged to send money home; at the same time, especially at the beginning, they fantasise about breaking through the boundaries of their origins and finally achieving a quasi-middle-class lifestyle. Consequently, they experiment with diverse kinds of employment, relationships, further education, and most easily, clothing styles and hair colours. They find jobs in manufacturing, entertainment or the sex business, and go in for various kinds of profitable activities, for example selling their bodies as surrogate mothers. The abject status that has been imposed on them does not render

this situation ethically questionable.

The exceptionality of Sheng Keyi's work originates from the fact that it successfully sheds light on the latent and intertwined reinforcement of class and gender bias, which effectively obstructs the working sisters from constructing themselves as subjects or even as fully human. Dai Jinhua criticised the cultural production of the 1990s for its unconscious erasure of either class or gender discourses, as if their entanglement could not be properly represented (2004: 299). The tendency is still visible, for example, in the aforementioned critique by Ma Ce, who interprets the novel as an expression of class discontent with the globalised capitalist production system, while entirely neglecting the gender aspect. The point that Sheng Keyi skillfully makes with her novel is, however, that it is a male-dominated capitalist logic.

Furthermore, *Northern Girls* delivers a remarkable counterexample to literary and popular narratives about the lower strata of society. The main protagonist of the novel, Qian Xiaohong, is a contradictory figure signalling lack of power and excess of the patriarchal social norm. Although, as a young woman of rural origin she is clearly deprived of social influence, she nevertheless freely expresses and lives her sexual desires. This sexual emancipation, however, collaterally stabilises her abject status quo.

Shifting corporeal discourses

The notion of body writing emerged in critical literary discourse as one of the attempts to conceptualise the corporeal turn in post-Maoist literature. Originally, it related primarily to texts by authors born in the 1970s, and only exceptionally to texts by authors belonging to the so-called newborn generation. The prominence of female writers within the heterogeneous post-70s group shows that texts with corporeality as their focal point were almost automatically associated with women's writing. Concomitantly, the scandal of the "speaking female body" was swiftly turned into a successful marketing strategy for promoting and selling books, one which made the dedicated discussion of their textual features less relevant. This re-invention of female authorship, which took place on the stage conveniently supplied by the profit-oriented global publishing market, was a new phenomenon, which strongly influenced the general reception of these texts. Consequently, the hypervisible sex of the authors – not their association with the legacies of feminine and feminist literature of the 1990s – was the main reason for classifying these texts as feminine. The earlier texts by mature professional writers and academics, widely ignored in the body writing discourse, were predominantly inspired by gender theories. Accordingly, they were oftentimes

consciously conceived as experiments in the implementation of feminist writing strategies. The older generation of writers, as a rule, remained hidden behind their texts, and those who sporadically had their photographs published usually preferred to represent not themselves but the social role they identified themselves with: that of writer, intellectual or academic. Only in the new century did some of them become more aware of the profit that might be gained from a conscious management of visual self-representation. The changes in the Chinese publishing market and in the mass media challenged the habitual invisibility of the older generation of female writers and, at the same time, confronted the beauty writers with the dilemma of being hypervisible and simultaneously ignored by the majority of professional authors. Finally, some of the older writers have deliberately learned to profit from the opportunities offered by the new media and the commercialised publishing market. For example, Zhai Yongming has gradually become one of the most recognisable faces of the older generation of female poets. She reflected on the process as follows:

我确实希望自己是一个独立的人，看我过去的照片我也会觉得我有些变化。我过去有点，怎么说呢？特别腼腆，不喜欢面对读者。很长一段时间我是不可能到台上去发言的，有社会恐惧症，最近一两年稍微好一点。(Zhai & Yang 2012: 273)

I really wish to be an independent person, and looking at old pictures of me I do feel that I've changed a bit. Before, I was..., how to say? Extremely shy and not used to meeting my readers face to face. For a long time, I couldn't speak in public, I suffered from social phobia, but in the last few years this has got slightly better.

Zhai's statement clarifies to what extent older writers felt anxious of being eventually completely silenced by the younger generation who were struggling to re-define authorship on their own performative terms which temporarily succeeded in captivating almost the full attention of those consuming literature.

The problematic body writing was mostly defined as potentially scandalous, unnecessarily excessive, dangerous to public morals and utterly hedonic. Nevertheless, a close reading of the texts under discussion frequently reveals the lack of a breakthrough in innovative poetic or literary language. Consequently, body writing may be considered as exploiting and continuing textual strategies introduced in the 1990s. Furthermore, body writing was only sporadically discussed as "writing by intellectuals", in spite of the elite academic education of these writers, with Mian Mian being the only exception. Many of their texts, if not necessarily the most widely received ones, bear traces of erudition and awareness of literary traditions. The disregard of their educational training may be a result of their deliberate self-staging in public, which consciously countered the accepted standards of behaviour for intellectuals. Instead,

they experimented with different types of self-identification and subject position anchored in the alternative, non-mainstream imagery of *jianghu* and *linglei* communities.

The body writing discourse is no less heterogeneous than the literary works it reflects upon. The two defining phenomena, Glamlit and Lower Body, of the first extensive conceptualisations of body writing by Ge and Xie, have already entered literary history. Nevertheless, this has not deterred the critics from applying the “body writing” label to more recent texts that transgress the quasi-middle-class sensitivity of the earlier ones.

Sheng Keyi’s novel is one of the first examples of this new tendency to thematise body experience that goes beyond the glamorous urbanity phantasmagoria. The bold description of sexuality and female sexual agency make the classification of Sheng as a “trendy” or “beautiful” writer comprehensible. Automatically, she too became the object of a vehement hate campaign aimed at the Beauty Writers, best exemplified by Ta Ai’s 他爱 popular publication *Shi da meinü zuojia de pipanshu* 十大美女作家的批判书 (Criticising Ten Beauty Writers, 2005)¹⁰³. Ta accuses Sheng of presenting herself as a former working sister so as to better merchandise the pornographic depiction of lower-class women for a well-to-do urban public (Ta 2005: 10-11). Ta’s critique, even if flawed and perhaps originally aimed mainly at self-promotion, cannot be entirely ignored here, as the exploitation of the bodies of disenfranchised women is actually a social reality. Sheng’s novel, however, neither preys upon the somehow pornographic curiosity of the lower class woman, nor does she fix the blue-collar bodies in the role of sexual objects; on the contrary, the novel shows the failed attempt of a rural girl to re-invent herself as an urban subject beyond the common logic of sacrifice or sexual exploitation. The aforementioned closing scene of the novel culminates in the revealing of the horror of the signs of sexual difference, and when the heroine eventually collapses under the unbearable weight of her breasts, she ends exactly where her place is, namely at the bottom of society. *Northern Girls* marks a turning point in the post-revolutionary corporeal rhetoric and its discussion of gender, as the book sheds light on the “tightly interwoven rewriting and restructuring of class and gender in the process of social transformation” (Dai 2004: 289).

In addition, Sheng did not simply attach an attractive female face to a social problem with the aim of transposing the problem into gender terms. She depicts various mechanisms of discrimination, regardless of the gender of the powerless. Consequently, the author shows

¹⁰³ Ta Ai brings together the following writers under this label: Wei Hui, Mian Mian, Sheng Keyi, Chun Shu, Anni Baobei, Jiu Dan, Yin Lichuan, Hong Yin, Zhao Nin and Muzi Mei.

how the current power takeover by the urban quasi-middle-class is made possible by the “simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (Butler 1993: 3). Sheng Keyi shows that the only mechanism to break abjection which is available to the protagonists of the novel is laughter, “since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection” (Kristeva 1982: 8). Consequently, the face of the Medusa, not only beautiful but laughing, finally appears before the reader.¹⁰⁴ *She laughs, and it’s frightening...*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing”. From Cixous 1976: 885.

¹⁰⁵ Cixous & Clément 2008: 32.

Chapter 5

Stigmatexts¹⁰⁶

Branding

The body turn in the literary field was initially thematised and theorised within the conceptual frames of gender and feminist-oriented academic approaches. Furthermore, outside the feminist “camp” the corporeal poetic was frequently “naturally” associated with women’s creativity. Consequently, the aporetic nature of body writing finally led to arbitrary and sometimes overtly sexist, sometimes emancipatory readings. In the twenty-first century, however, the focus of academic-based body-writing discourse has increasingly shifted towards a socially sensitive approach. Leaving the vicissitudes of (women’s) bodies, the academics and critics gradually turned to the vicissitudes of social stratification. As a consequence, body writing became one of the channels through which the topic of social injustice (also in its corporeal dimensions) was reintroduced into literature and, furthermore, into the public discussion on social transformation.

The main phenomenon, aside from the aforementioned emergence of *hourenminxing* sentiments (see Chapter 4) linked to the re-orientation of the critical discourse, is the increasing visibility of so-called 打工文学 *dagong wenxue* (migrant workers’ literature) or *diceng wenxue* 底层文学 (literature of the lower strata) within the field of literary production. These terms evoke twofold connotations: they may signify writings by intellectuals about the lower strata of society and in such a rendition recall Chen Xiaoming’s discussion of the *kunan* (“hardship”) theme in literature (see Chapter 4); or they may point directly to texts by non-intellectual authors, mainly displaced peasants and temporary factory workers. According to Chen, the re-entry of the disenfranchised groups into the intellectuals’ field of perception, and consequently into their writing, may be logically reconnected with the critical spirit of May Fourth literature (2008). This opinion is similarly shared by Zhai Yongming, who interprets the reemergence of the socially disenfranchised figures in literature as a sign of writing intellectuals’ acknowledgment of their social responsibility, an important tendency which in her opinion should nevertheless not outweigh their responsibility towards art:

而当下的“底层写作”无疑是对这一传统的回归与继承，将处于社会底层的“沉默者”

¹⁰⁶ This term was coined by Hélène Cixous (2005).

集体推向前台，表达他们集体性的诉求 (…)

必须要强调的一点是，文学的社会承担并不意味着要以文学审美特性的丧失为代价，文学作为一种重要的艺术门类，有着自己独特的规律和特点，在对文学社会功能强化的同时必须保证文学审美特性的存在，“底层文学”自然也不例外。(Zhai 2008a)

However, contemporary “writing of the lower strata” is doubtlessly a return to this [May Fourth] tradition and its continuation. It brings the community of the “silent ones” at the bottom of society to the fore and expresses their collective demands (...).

What must be stressed here is that the [recognition of the] social responsibility of literature does not mean that aesthetic merits have to be sacrificed; literature is an important art form. Accordingly, it has its own distinctive rules and features and even where the social function of literature is emphasised its aesthetic character must be preserved, “lower strata literature” being no exception.

A brief overview of the proposed designations and definitions for the growing corpus of writing by and about the lower strata¹⁰⁷ is enough to show that they are often marked with the same kind of ambiguities as are the definitions of women’s writing. The latter may similarly be simply defined as writing by, about and for women. The main difference is, however, that the vast majority of *diceng* writers do not oppose their labelling.¹⁰⁸ Those who speak in favour of the concept of *dagong wenxue* and even propose it as the paragon of an exceptional kind of writing which must be judged only on its own merits and, moreover, perhaps entirely disconnected from the highbrow aesthetic canon promoted by intellectuals such as Zhai Yongming:

我们认为，“打工诗歌”的意义和价值在于：贴近时代，关注社会底层的生存与命运，这样的诗歌绝不会曲高和寡，这样的艺术才更有血有肉，形象丰满，才可能在千百万人心中越转越远。(Xu, Lou & Chen 2009: 3)

We think that the significance and value of “migrant workers’ poetry” lie in its up-to-datedness and its concern with the life and lot of members of the lower strata of society. This kind of poetry will never be elitist, and the truer to life [literally: more **bloody** and **fleshy**] this kind of art is, the more it is filled with imagery, the more hearts it can reach and the deeper it will touch them. (emphasis mine)

(…) 打工文学固然有作家、有作品，但它从一开始就不仅是一种被指认的创作行为，而且是一种试图做出指认的批评行为，这种批评属于一个广大的社会意识过程。(Li

¹⁰⁷ Apart from *diceng wenxue* and *dagong wenxue*, the concepts of *caogenxing* 草根性 (grassroot-ness) and *diceng shengcun zhong de xiezuo* 底层生存中的写作 (writing among the lower strata) were proposed by Li Shaojun (2004) and Zhang Qinghua (2005) respectively. All these terms differ slightly in meaning, *dagong wenxue* is, for example, a more narrow and specific concept than *diceng wenxue*, which is more open and may also include texts by peasants or the unemployed, besides those by migrant workers. Within the field, the status of former migrant workers who accepted white-collar positions (as editors or cultural officials) is identified as problematic too.

¹⁰⁸ See the discussion in Sun 2012:1000-1001.

2009: 1)

Of course migrant worker literature has its authors and its texts. However, from the very beginning it has been recognised not only as a creative activity, but also as a form of critique that attempts to identify [problems], and this kind of criticism is part of the broad process of the development of social consciousness.

As a consequence, the literary grassroots movement promoted not only its own writers and poets, but also its own literary critics. Many of them originally came from the milieu of migrant workers, cultural activists and editors of unofficial and official literary journals dedicated to *diceng* literature. Subsequently, the leading theme in discussions arising around this literary phenomenon is that of distinction, which is expressed in various terms such as social strata, class, life experience and, no less importantly, corporeality.

Since the publication of the very first *dagong* novel in the year 1984 (Yang 2009: 378), works classified as belonging to “lower strata literature” have appeared in various literary journals, however most frequently in unofficial publications edited by cultural workers and migrant workers themselves in the industrial region of the Pearl River Delta. Since the turn of the century they have gradually gained acceptance in wider literary and cultural circles, especially after several texts (mostly poetry) were published by prestigious national literary journals such as *Poetry*, *Poetry Periodical* or *Xingxing* (Stars). The reception of these texts was nevertheless overshadowed by a certain uneasiness on the side of the academic critique, which showed itself to a great extent incapable of finding an appropriate language for the evaluation of the literary production of blue-collar workers. Paradoxically it seems that, from the perspective of the critics, discussion from a purely aesthetic position was not entirely pertinent in this case. Grassroots writing, in deep layers of which the “class” spectre turns up howling, seems to be inevitably bound up with some anxiety on the side of the readership, perhaps because “[...] in today’s China, questions of class are no longer explicit in political science or sociology” (Dai 2012:238).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ The phantomatic nature of “class” problems and the current lack of an appropriate and widely accepted language to express it are, from the academic perspective, linked to the ongoing reconceptualisation within the field of social sciences in contemporary China. *Diceng* seems to mean “lower class/status strata”, which basically includes those who engage in production and agricultural work. But it also includes the unemployed, the sick, and those unable to work, and as such, the concept is potentially victimising or stigmatising. Within the literary field, controversies arose around the attribution of “authenticity” and moral superiority to this genre as opposed to privileged middle-class writing. The polemic between Zhang Qinghua and Qian Wenliang provides a suitable example of the troublesome nature of *diceng* literature (Qian 2007, Zhang 2005, 2008). In 2010 Zhang Qinghua addressed the ambiguous position of an academic-based critic again:

我不知道我该怎样选择我说话的方式和“立场”，来谈论郑小琼这样的诗人。(2010: 177) “I don’t know what words or ‘standpoint’ to choose when discussing poets like Zheng Xiaoqiong”.

Injuries

有一次，我的手指不小心让车刀碰了一下，半个指甲便在悄无声息中失去了，疼，只有尖锐的疼，沿着手指头上升，直刺入肉体，骨头。血，顺着冷却油流下来。(…)

疼痛在我的手指上结痂 (…)

我是来南方写下第一首诗歌的，准确地说，是那次手指甲盖受伤的时候开始写的 (…)
(Zheng 2006: 17)

One day, I wasn't careful enough and the lathe tool ran into my finger, soundlessly scrapping off half my nail. Pain, there was only piercing pain, moving up from my fingertip till it penetrated my whole body. Blood dripped down along with the coolant oil. (…)

The pain formed into a scab on my finger (…)

To be exact, the first poem I wrote after coming down South was started after that injury to my fingernail (…)

This quotation originates from the essay “Tie” 铁 (Iron), for which Zheng Xiaoqiong received the “*Xin Langchao* (New Wave) Literary Award” from the authoritative *Renmin Wenxue* (People's Literature). Today she is perhaps one the most recognised *dagong* poet. Zheng belongs to the strict avant-garde of those lower-stratum writers who crossed the boundaries of the regional and entered the field of national highbrow literature. Consequently, her poetry is read and acknowledged not only – even if substantially – as a subaltern articulation, but also for its distinctly aesthetic and poetic merits. Zheng is, furthermore, one of a larger group of (mainly male) worker-poets who reinscribed the disenfranchised labouring body into literature under the sign of pain:

“打工诗歌”对身体的书写，揭示了铭刻于身体经验中的社会现实以至于历史的烙印。
(Liu 2009: 140)

The textualisation of the body within “dagong poetry” has revealed the inscriptions of experienced social reality on the body and furthermore even its stigmatisation throughout history.

Liu, a former migrant worker himself, and currently a poet and literary critic, defines *dagong* body writing as alternative to the literary mainstream (*linglei*). He joins a larger group of academics, such as Zhang Qinghua and Xie Youshun, who theorise the lower strata's corporeal poetics as a valuable “authentic” alternative to the phoney middle class body

narratives:

若干年后，读者 (...) 再来读这一时期的中国文学，无形中会有一个错觉，以为这个时期中国的青年人都在酒吧，都在喝咖啡，都在穿名牌，都在世界各国游历，那些底层的、被损害者的经验完全缺席了，这就是一种生活对另一种生活的殖民。(Xie 2009: 29)

Someone reading Chinese literary works a few years from now may, without noticing, gain a false impression and think that all the young Chinese of this period visit bars, drink coffee, wear famous brands and travel abroad. The experience of those at the bottom of society, of the suffering and afflicted, is completely absent. Indeed it is the colonisation of one kind of life by another.

这也许才是真正的“身体写作”，真正的身体写作不是亵渎感官，不是脱衣舞和裸奔，而是春蚕吐丝，蜡炬成灰，将生命“嵌入”作品中的质感。(Zhang 2010: 178)

Perhaps this in fact is the real “body writing”. Real body writing is neither abuse of the senses, nor striptease, nor running around naked, “in spring silkworms continue spinning cocoons until they die; candlewicks keep dripping tears until they turn all into ash”¹¹⁰, it is life inscribed into the texture of the literary work.

Liu identifies literary self-representations of lower strata corporeality as a novel locus of class difference. The workers’ bodies bear visible traces of abuse, injuries and vocational diseases. They are “scarry”, and so are their poems, [they] “celebrate the wound and repeat the lesion” (Cixous 2008: xii):

所谓的身体写作也将面临同样尖锐的质询：同样是‘身体’，为什么被大火烧死的深圳原致丽玩具厂的女工们的‘身体’却得不到文学的书写？我们看到的只能是，再对‘性别’或者‘身体’的抽象的阐述中，‘阶级差别’实际上被深深地遮蔽，被遮蔽的，还有更加真实或者更加残酷的生活的一面，现实中差异性被意识形态有意无意悄悄‘缝合’。被此前的‘身体写作’所遮蔽了的更加真实的身体，正在从打工诗歌中非常有力地凸显出来。‘打工诗歌’是一种身体在场地写作。(Liu 2009: 140)

So-called body writing is faced with equally penetrating questions: body for body, why have the “bodies” of the female workers who died in the fire in the former Zhili toy factory in Shenzhen never found a place in literature?¹¹¹ We can only note that “class difference” is actually entirely obscured in the abstract elaborations on “bodies” or “gender”. The more authentic cruel side of life is hidden from view, and the real differences are, intentionally or

¹¹⁰ A quote from Li Shangyin’s untitled poem, transl. by Ye Yang (Luo 2011: 368).

¹¹¹ Here Liu paraphrases (intentionally or not) a question which was asked earlier by Dai Jinhua, who referred to the same example of the Zhili toy factory in her critique of the body narratives’ class blindness: “When we argue the case for “women writing their bodies” – expressions of the physical experiences of women, their desires and sexual experiences – do we at the same time address the women who suffered in the fire at the Zhili toy factory in Shenzhen in 1993?” (2004: 289)

otherwise, quietly “sewn up” by ideology. The more authentic body that was obscured in previous “body writing” now emerges prominently and forcefully in migrant workers’ poetry. “Dagong poetry” is writing with the body present.

The last sentence refers to Yu Jian and Xie Youshun’s joint elaboration of their understanding of poetry as “the body’s textual history” (see Chapter 2). According to Liu, migrant workers’ poetry realises Yu and Xie’s poetical ideals, which state that lyric poetry should be embodied and embedded equally in language and in the writing subject’s existential situation:

诗歌就是一个人身体的语言史，推而广之，甚至可以说，写作也是个人身体的语言史。这里边有两个要素，一个是身体，一个是语言，缺一不可。身体是说出他作为一个存在着的在场，他是出现在诗歌里面的，不是跟诗歌脱离关系的；他作为一个有身体的存在着，生活在这个世界上，他身体所感知，接触和遇见的每一件事，都跟他的写作有关，惟有如此，他的写作才是一种在场的写作。(Yu & Xie 1999: 191)

Poetry is an individual body’s textual history; in the same way it can even be said that any writing is also an individual body’s textual history. There are two essential factors, the body and language, neither of which is dispensable. The body declares the presence of its existence as a being, it appears in poetry and cannot be divorced from it; existing as a body, it lives in this world, and everything the body feels, touches and encounters is relevant to its writing. Only thus can its writing be “eyewitness” writing.

In addition, migrant workers’ writing is, in Liu’s opinion, the first kind allowing a non-hegemonic expression of class without blocking out other kinds of inequality, such as physical disability, age or, ultimately, gender. Consequently, apart from Sheng Keyi’s novelistic contribution (see Chapter 4), *dagong* poets delivered the first larger corpus of texts that seem to address the current global mechanisms of unequal power distribution in all their multiple and mutually entangled dimensions.

Pain

The original injury described by Zheng Xiaoqiong may be read as a trace, a stigma, from which her poetry originates. She is the author of numerous literary representations of bodies in pain which publicly expose the sufferings of workers shut off behind factory walls. Zheng constantly revisits the places of injury and fixes the traumatic symptoms in her poems, and hence she does not leave any place for recovery or hope of a better future. Consequently, her “scarry” texts cultivate the wounds:

I want stigmata. I do not want the stigmata to disappear. I am attached to my engravings, to the

stings in my flesh and my mental parchment. I do not fear that trauma and stigma will form an alliance: the literature in me wants to maintain and reanimate traces.

Traumatism as an opening to the future of the wound is the promise of a text.

(Cixous 2008: xiv)

Even if these stigmatexts represent only a fragment of Zheng's work, they are the most widely received and analysed ones. She may be acknowledged as the writer who introduced a novel "chronotope of pain" (Berry 2004: 15) into contemporary Chinese cultural imagery. This concept, proposed by Michael Berry, recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of chronotope as interconnected temporal and spatial junctures that appear specifically in literature (Ibid., 14). Berry speaks of "chronotopes of pain" in modern China as of historical atrocities that have been traditionally tied to a specific time and space. In Zheng's writing, the factory of the globalised industrial era is transposed into a contemporary chronotope of pain:

(...)

也没有谁， 会注意机台女工的月经

and nobody notices that the woman worker at the machine is having her period

那股潮水在体内涌动， 她颤抖的肩膀下

the tide surging within her body, under her trembling shoulders

无声的疼痛， 被切割机切断， 捣碎

silent pain, cut off by the cutter bar, pounded to pieces

她的无奈， 惊慌的眼神， 悄悄的叹息

her helplessness, the scared look in her eyes, her noiseless sighs

都被工业时代淹没， 工业孕育的一切

all drowned out by the industrial age, everything industry breeds

必将吞没她的整个， 将她的身体， 灵魂

inevitably engulfs her entirely, her body, her soul

思想， 梦想剪裁， 组合， 成为花架上

her thoughts, her dreams cut out, reassembled to become

等待出货的件件散发光泽的商品

all those glossy goods on display awaiting shipment

(Zheng 2009: 37, from "Wuye Nügong" 午夜女工, Female worker at midnight)

Moreover, *dagong* poetry understood as a "chronotope of pain" simultaneously recalls Renny Christopher's notion of "work as war", a comparison for the credibility of which he argues as

follows:

The level of violence makes working-class literature in some respects similar to the genre of the war novel, (...).

Traumatic workplace accidents present a particular challenge to the writer: we don't see this level of violence and gore in any genre other than the war novel. Readers are aware of the toll of war in terms of death and injuries; the toll of working-class labor is not at the forefront of the national consciousness of the way war is. (Christopher 2011: 35)

From this perspective, the Chinese worker-poets' crucial achievement has been the shifting into visibility of their obscured suffering worker bodies, by means of which they represent themselves in spite of their lack of social power or ability to "talk back". This claim tunes in with the overall tone of Liu's introduction to the migrant worker authors' body poetics:

而对于打工诗歌而言，他们从沉默的身体到说话的身体，他们不断地鼓励身体去发言，讲述和诉说 (...) (Liu 2009: 148)

But, with regard to "migrant workers' poetry", from the wordless body they go to the speaking body. They unceasingly encourage the body to speak, to give account, to relate (...).

As a consequence, the early self-representations of the blue-collar authors featured shrieks of pain or strident howls in place of clear verbal articulation. They have tended to overshadow the aforementioned popular narrations of equal opportunity for social mobility (see Chapter 4) within the confines of "desiring China". Nevertheless, they do not automatically unsettle the mainstream narrative, as the image of the body in pain is not necessarily an empowering one. According to Elaine Scarry, "[p]hysical pain is not identical with (and often exists without) either agency or damage" (Scarry 1986: 15). The composing of poetry rooted in the experience of physical pain and psychic suffering may be compared to the process of rediscovering speech in order to overcome a traumatic experience. Scarry speaks of this development as of a borderline moment in the individual's history:

Physical pain is not only itself resistant to language but also actively destroys language, deconstructing it into the pre-language of cries and groans. (...) Conversely, to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech and so regains his powers of self-objectification is almost to be present at the birth, or rebirth, of language. (Ibid.: 172)

Therefore the body in pain becomes an important foundation on which the new subject, the migrant worker poet, can establish herself. It may be also regarded as an alternative to other

available identifications – with gender or the social milieu – but it may equally well be intertwined with them.

Nevertheless, with her stigmatexts the migrant worker contributes to her overcoding as a mere suffering body by the majority of the readership. This is the consequence of the poet's repetitious identification with her original injury. This poetic gesture of self-victimisation oftentimes verges on narcissism. Subsequently, her literary career and her public reception remain inevitably bound to her socio-economic identity as a self-conscious victim. Furthermore, from the historical perspective, her poetry may easily be connected to other culturally accepted expressions of – mainly feminine – endurance, such as the women's script (McLaren 1996: 400, 411) or the practice of "speaking bitterness" (诉苦 *su ku*) (Jacka 1998: 59-64).

The aforementioned uneasiness of academic-based critics with regard to literary creations from the bottom of society may arise from the elusive nature of the war-like horror of the workplace, as thematised by Christopher, which may remain incomprehensible for middle-class readers. It is, moreover, closely linked to the ethical question of spectatorship of workers' suffering. Finally it seems, too, that the migrant worker authors cannot prevent their personal utterances being appropriated by a national narrative that portrays China as being victimised by the global capitalist system. Their poetry is oftentimes read and interpreted like other individual manifestations of protest against global injustice, such as the suicides by factory workers suffering from cruel working conditions. Hence perhaps the most widely quoted remark by Zheng Xiaoqiong is the following:

During the five years of working in the plant, I witnessed almost each month, a worker having their finger chopped, maimed or having the nail scrapped off. My heart was full of pain. Then I read in the newspaper that each year in the Pearl River Delta, an average number of 40,000 fingers were amputated. I couldn't help calculating in my mind: if we line up these fingers, what a long line that would form, and that such a line is still getting longer.
(Zheng Xiaoqiong, quoted in Sun 2012: 1004)

Stigma

In her etymological inquiry into the origin of the scary nature of literature, Cixous makes the following claim:

But now I discover a supplementary trick that Stigma plays on us:

In another reign, in another scene, that of vegetation, stigma is not a sign of destruction, of suffering, of interdiction. On the contrary, the stigma is the sign of fertilization, of germination.

Stigma is the part of the pistil, **the female parts of the flower**, where the male pollen germinates.

(2008: xiv, emphasis mine)

The overcoding of Zheng Xiaoqiong as a migrant worker poet who represents the painful experience of a certain socio-economic stratum reduces and finally renders invisible her individual poetic subjectivity. It obscures the existence of a different corpus of texts by Zheng Xiaoqiong, one that transgresses the unidimensional *parole* of class discontent. These texts preclude such a reductive reading, and likewise the female stigma, they are gendered and earthy.

Zheng Xiaoqiong (b. 1980) belongs to the post-eighties, or second generation of migrants. In 1999 she graduated from a secondary medical school (卫校 *weixiao*) in her home province of Sichuan. Unable to find a fixed job, she finally moved, in 2001, to the industrial city of Dongguan in Guangdong Province. In the same year, the first of her *dagong* career, she also started writing poetry. Prior to the publication of her first poem she worked in a metallurgical plant, afterwards she moved to a plastic plant, a toy and furniture factory. She declined the invitation to join the Dongguan Writers' Guild, preferring instead to stay on as a factory worker, albeit as a low-level technician. Today she belongs to the editorial team of the literary journal *Zuopin* (Works of Literature) and advises the local government on the situation of migrant workers.¹¹²

From the very beginning Zheng's poems bear traces of gender identity. Even if she claims to speak for the entire displaced collective of migrant workers, the lyrical voice of her poetry is not gender-neutral. The branding of human beings she refers to is firmly grounded in the distinctly female existential experience, nevertheless it also originates from her identification with a certain socio-economic stratum.

In her early poetry cycle (written in 2003 and 2004) titled "Jinhualun" 进化论 (The theory of evolution), Zheng thematises the unequal power relations in a contemporary city. She shows how the weak (women from the countryside) are exploited and preyed upon by the strong. The title of the entire cycle, which is composed of six long poems, hints directly at the ongoing struggle between the various "species", and the prospective survival in the urban

¹¹² Biographical information based on Sun 2012; Wang & Zheng 2013.

jungle of the most forceful and best adapted:

(...) 男性的城市建筑在我面前闪烁

(...) the buildings of the male city glimmer before me

玻璃皿上的招牌写满了女性的肉体。情欲的越冬苗圃绿意惊人

the glass signs are full of female bodies. The amazing spring awakening of the overwintered seedbed of lust

城市的面具在我闭塞的血管里生长，一条蛰伏地层的蚯蚓

The mask of the city is growing inside my occluded veins, an earthworm hibernating in the lower strata

它阴郁的神色，坐在霓虹深处的女子。她们的肉体

Its gloomy look, women sitting in the pool of neon lights. Their bodies

简陋的欲望，裸体的风姿，城市的广场以男性的器具勃起

crude chambers of desire, naked charm, the city square erected by man's tool

涵动的灯光压低了泥土，也压弯了一个女性的肉体

The weight of restless lights has compressed the earth, and bent the feminine body

她们浮萍一样的根扎进都市的水泥地。

The women's duckweed-like roots plunge through the city's concrete ground.

(Zheng 2007, from "Jianjiao de qiuyin" 尖叫的蚯蚓, Shrieking earthworm)

In every one of the six poems Zheng addresses the multi-faceted character of social inequality. In this skillful montage of swiftly alternating lyrical images, she moves freely between different enactments of injustice, showing the exploitation of nature, women, the rural environment, and finally, of certain nations and regions within the global capitalist order:

(...) 经济学家在叫着

the economists cry out

市场经济没有同情心，弱肉强食，我乡下的姐妹只能

the market economy has no heart, the weak are prey to the strong, my rural sisters have no alternative but

成为他们床上的大餐，他们丧失人性的著作成为市场经济的

to be dished up on their beds, they [the economists] have lost the book of humanity become the market economy's

罗盘，刻进了国家的尸骨，刻进了一个乡下贫困者的肋骨

compass, carved into the nation's dead bones, carved into the ribs of the rural poor
 它体青色的潮汐泛起，我一直坐在南方的黑暗中央
 in green tidal waves they flow, and all the time I sit in the South's heart of darkness
 目睹在化学物品丧失生育的姐妹们，她们的叹息
 seeing with my own eyes my sisters becoming infertile among the chemical products, their sighs
 成为时代缔造的伤口 (...)
 become the wounds of our times (...)
 (Zheng 2007, from "Jiuri de zhizhu" 旧日的蜘蛛, Spider from the old days)

In general, Zheng's long poems and poem cycles, which to date have not received much critical attention, tend to be more intense, emotional and convoluted than her short poems and essays. Accordingly, the latter have frequently been read as "realistic" depictions of migrant workers' lives. "The theory of evolution", in contrast, escapes such mimetic reading, due to its symbolic language and passionate poignant tone. In the six poems of the cycle, Zheng compares those at the bottom of the social hierarchy with the weakest links in the evolutionary chain. She furthermore demonstrates how adaptation to the inhuman urban environment concomitantly triggers a process of degeneration or mutation in previously healthy organisms. Mechanisms of "natural selection" operating in the urban jungle finally lead to the extinction of nature and human kindness. Consequently, Zheng's poems may be compared to an elaborate and passionate prosecution speech. She addresses not only the failure of those currently in power to protect the weak, but also perceives this state of matters as resulting from long-lasting historical and structural circumstances. Zheng unrestrainedly expresses deep anger and bitter resentment, raising her voice as a witness for those who are too occupied with the struggle for biological survival to speak:

(...) 时代的草履虫
 (...) Paramecia of our age
 她们用肉体欲望身体曲线向世界发言、发言、发言
 they use carnal desire bodily curves to speak, speak, speak to this world
 流向垃圾站，三流杂志的艳情版面
 they stream to the dump sites, the erotic pages of third-rate magazines
 缺乏舌头的草履虫在街头经济的转弯处
 paramecia without tongues on the street-economy corners

在驱逐、罚款、收容、没收的词语中挣扎

struggle with the vocabulary of expulsion, fines, detention, expropriation

她们只能用高潮来注解两性经济的总和 (...)

climax is all they can use to comment on the conjunction of the two sexes and the economy (...)

(Zheng 2007, from “Caolüchong” 草履虫, Paramecia)

In her poetry Zheng articulates an uncompromising and radical critique of globalisation, capitalism, modernity, industrialisation, the state, and patriarchal imperial traditions. She seems to have no illusions that the capitalist state might be capable of providing security and support for the lower strata of society. Instead, it only ensures the reproduction of the powerful and the wealthy in society. The subjected and abjected female body is a recurring figure in her writing, symbolising the violent power abuse inherent to the commodification of bodily capital and labour.

“Renxing tianqiao” 人行天桥 (Pedestrian overpass), a long poem which was written in the course of the same two years as “The theory of evolution”, is the one in which Zheng’s anger and grief reach a lyrical climax. It is composed of six parts, three titled with a sequence of letters: “A”, “B” and “C”, the others bearing numerals as titles: “1”, “2” and “3”. The former refer to current social reality, while the latter recall obscure images from the mythological and historical past. The text does not follow any versification pattern; the flow of lines in the numbered fragments is, however, separated by dashes. The frequent omission of punctuation marks and the (perhaps deliberately) chaotic structure evokes the impression of a hysterical monologue, recited or shouted aloud without pause even for breath. The poetic “I” is shown standing on a circular-shaped pedestrian overpass and from this perspective it listens to and observes the city. Apocalyptic images arise almost simultaneously, building up to a delirious, cacophonous landscape:

难以数清的本田捷达宝马皇冠的桥车装饰着这个城市的繁荣，珠江嘉陵南方摩托车装饰的小商人走过，一辆自行车八辆公共汽车的小市民手挽着手穿过汉形的街道河流，我是被这个城市分流的外乡人挤上了世纪广场的人行天桥。120 分贝的汽车鸣叫而过，100 分贝的折价叫卖阴魂不散，75 分贝的假证贩子象苍蝇一样在耳边嗡嗡，60 分贝的是一个个出卖肉体的暗娼在询问“先生去玩玩吧！”(...)

我站在第 26 根钢柱前，环形天桥对面一个空调安装的广告牌下，三个心怀各异的明星拍卖内衣与底裤 (...)

一个算命的江湖处士突然大叫一声“城管来了！”那些假证贩子妓女们躲进了行色匆匆的人群中，一个贩卖水果河南老妇人来不及闪，她的摊子被掀翻，苹果满地。治安队员将其压在地上，我听见她的嚎叫比金斯堡更为动人。(…)

一个讨不到工钱的外来工从第四十八根铁柱跳下去了，他白色的脑浆迸地。此刻伟大的《劳动法》正在桑拿女郎的三角裤微笑。“向伟大的时代致敬吧！”报纸如此说。

(Zheng 2008: 92, 93)

[I]t's difficult to count all the Hondas Jettas BMWs Crowns that adorn this booming city, small traders adorned with Jialing motorcycles from the South drive by, one bicycle eight busloads of town-dwellers holding hands cross the whirling street, squeezed out by this city's migrant streams I have mounted the Century Square pedestrian overpass. 120 decibels of hooting cars pass by, 100 decibels of discount hawkers' bawlings linger in the air, 75 decibels from traders of fake licences buzz buzz like flies in your ears, 60 decibels come from each of the unlicensed prostitutes offering their bodies for sale: "Mister, want to play?" (…)

I'm standing in front of the twenty-sixth steel pillar; opposite the circular overpass beneath a billboard fixed to an air conditioner three stars with other intentions are selling reduced underwear and panties (…).

A fortune-telling jianghu hermit suddenly cries out "The city inspectors!" The traders of fake licences the prostitutes duck into the hurrying crowds, an old woman a fruit-seller from Hunan isn't quick enough, her stall is overturned, apples cover the ground. Security guards stamp them into the ground, I hear her howl, more moving even than Ginsberg's. (…)

A migrant worker unable to get his wages paid out leapt down from the forty-eighth iron pillar, his white brain spatters the ground. At the same time the great "Labour law" sauna hostesses' little panties smile. "Salute our great era!" is what the newspapers say.

The urban panorama viewed from the overpass by a migrant worker displays scenes of a degenerate humanity that is constitutive of the current "great era" which Zheng appraises in a highly ironic tone. Its victory symbolises the rejection and finally the destruction of legacies of human history. Sundry images from humanity's past appear in the numbered sequences, only to be immediately exorcised by the living pictures. The elimination of morality and cultural heritage conditions the ongoing conversion of the city into a global megalopolis. The only history which is still relevant is that of people's carnal and material desires:

(…) 人行天桥上 我们输掉了历史 / 在春宫图的一百零八页 红烛似的阳具 / 点燃了幽暗的夜
 海伦的尖叫在水中 / 妃子被送往遥远的国度 欲望的人行天桥 / 还站着那么多人
 他们在呼喊 / 掘开祖先的墓碑 看看地下还有多少木乃伊和兵马俑 (…)

(Ibid.: 102)

(...) on the pedestrian overpass we lost history / on page one hundred and eight of the erotic album Spring Palace a penis resembling a red candle / lights up the gloomy night
Helen of Troy's screams in the water / the imperial concubine is brought to a remote country
the pedestrian overpass of desire / still so many people standing there they're shouting / dig
open the ancestral graves see how many mummies and terracotta warriors still lie buried
below (...)

In another of her long “angry” poems from this period, “Weiguoji” 魏国记 (Historical records of Wei), Zheng expresses a veiled critique of contemporary China. She reports on the state of matters in the Wei Kingdom, which is showing the first visible signs of decline and loss of power. These signs grow in number and slowly overshadow the once prosperous state. The state power ignores the omens of coming tragedy, and, instead of reforming itself, gradually reduces the sphere of citizens’ freedom rights. Those few who manage to escape from the growing pressure of the regime are compared to “Zhuangzi’s butterflies”, but the majority of the people are bound to the soil. The national territory slowly becomes a prison:

(...)

魏国伟大的航行将把我们带到和谐的海岸，

The great navy of the Wei Kingdom is about to bring us to the shore of harmony¹¹³,

你必须放弃选举、思想，做一个良民，

you have to give up elections, thinking, you must be a law-abiding citizen,

种地，做工。魏国，过了平原，正处矮坡山岭，

till the land, work. The Kingdom of Wei, past the flatlands, in a place of low hills and
mountain ranges,

离太阳神的位置只有一千五公里的距离，

is only one thousand five hundred kilometres from the seat of the sun god,

现在支起市场的拓扑学，发展的语言学

now the market-supporting topology, the linguistics of development

稳定的逻辑学，让神与人民都生活在可控的思想中

the logic of stability, make gods and people live with controllable thoughts

以免稳定的大局遭到破坏

¹¹³ Allusion to the Chinese leader Hu Jintao's (President of the People's Republic of China from 2002 to 2012) socio-economic vision of a “socialist harmonious society” promoted together with his concept of scientific development, which was later criticised for promoting stability at all costs.

in order to protect the stable situation
 它开始虚构情节，历史，现实，未来，
 it has begun to fabricate circumstances, history, reality, the future,
 归纳成主义，路线，理论，思想
 from which to draw its ideology, political line, theory, thought
 制造一个巨大的铁皮笼里， 将我们圈养其中 (...)
 thus creating a great iron cage for us to be raised in (...)
 (Ibid.: 105)

“Historical records of Wei” is a bitter satire of Hu Jintao’s China. Under Hu the grand narrative of development could no longer remain unquestioned or coexist with the numerous side effects of the previous decades of China’s intense modernisation and integration into the global economic system. The exploitation, oppression, exclusion, discrimination and, sometimes, destruction of the lives of working people became the source of growing frustration, resentment and psychic disorders, which could no longer be easily appeased by the promotion of a consuming, desiring China. The increasing polarisation of society in terms of access to capital, property and political power could not be negated any more. Consequently, Zheng accuses the privileged of ignoring the daily drudgery of skilled craftsmen and reducing the people to a mere means of production:

(...) 这繁荣原本来历不明
 the source of this boom is unknown
 它有三角债，失业率，妓女性病，毒品，
 it comprises chain debts, unemployment rates, prostitutes’ venereal diseases, drugs,
 二奶，案件，红头文件，法律通告 (...)
 mistresses, files, law cases, red tape, legal notices (...)
 他们习惯了在农民上榨取了
 they got used to squeezing the peasants to create
 魏国时代的辉光 (...)
 the splendour of the Wei Kingdom era (...)
 (Ibid.: 106)

Zheng’s critique of the “Wei Kingdom” is not, however, voiced in support of anarchism and the final abandonment of the institution of the national state. Drawing upon additional sources such as her other poems, it may be concluded that the poetic “I” is admonishing the rulers

from a patriot's standpoint. The prosperity and stability of the state cannot be based on the exploitation of the people. In addition, Zheng cautions the authorities that they will not be able in the long term to fool the workers with their propaganda of success. Zheng speaks in favour of a protective state, with responsible rulers who acknowledge their obligations towards all citizens. Furthermore, she argues that the narrowing of the zones of freedom accompanied by enhanced control is a counterproductive measure which cannot sustain and stabilise state power.

Since 2004, Zheng's interest in composing long poems has slowly faded. Currently, she is experimenting with short poetic forms which are inspired by traditional Chinese poetry, especially by the classical regulated poetry of the Tang period. In addition, between 2004 and 2010 she conducted quasi-ethnographic research on the existential situation of female workers. In 2012 she published the results of her investigation in book form under the title "Nügongji" 女工记 (Records of female workers). The publication consists of Zheng's notes and poems, which are all dedicated to real women she met during her *dagong* career. In this book, Zheng frankly addresses often omitted topics like the sexual needs of female workers, the absence of medical support in the city, the dissolution of families living apart and the lack of access to social mobility. She focuses on the workers' lot as an inherited social stigma. In addition, she thematises the destruction of the natural environment in the countryside so that the promise of retiring in peace to the home village loses currency. In its mimetic attitude, this work resembles Zheng's earlier "body of pain" poetics. It clearly aims at bearing witness to the painful *dagong* experience, but this time also criticises the absence of suitable policies addressing and capable of changing the fate of migrant workers in industrial zones. As in "Historical records of Wei" Zheng raises her alarmed voice in the hope that the tragedy looming ahead may be yet avoided. She concludes the publication as follows:

我不希望这些女工沦为麻木的器具，也不愿意他们 [sic!] 成为血腥的暴力者，但是现实却找不到化解这些的方法，我只能深深担忧着在地层积聚的暴力，或者被压抑的暴力会成为一股怎么样的力量，它会将我们这个国家如何扭曲！

(Zheng in Xu, Chen 2012: 185)¹¹⁴

I neither want these female workers to be reduced to the status of passive tools, nor do I want them to become sanguinary toughs, but in reality there's nothing I can do to defuse this kind of reactions, I can only deeply worry about the violence accumulating in the lower rungs of

¹¹⁴ A selection of materials from "Nügongji" was published in Xu & Chen's 2011 *nian Zhongguo dagong shige jingxuan*, pp. 162-185.

society, or about the kind of force this suppressed violence might become, and about how it might warp our country!

Eco-injuries

In her sober critique of global capitalism and modernisation Zheng does not harbour any illusions that a return to the rural “Garden of Eden” is a genuinely available option for migrant workers. The modern intoxication with the development and progress paradigm has been sustained at the cost of the destruction of natural resources, and as such is now finally endangering the existence of those exposed to its byproducts. As already mentioned in the discussion of “The theory of evolution”, nature is one of the victims of the development rush.¹¹⁵ Zheng’s poetic descriptions of vicious destruction of nature recall Bonnie Mann’s concept of the “natural sublime”:

What I call here the “natural sublime” is not only then, an experience of terror, of the suspense over what’s to become of us. We cannot look upon waterfall or mountain, raging river or vast forest, without the grief associated with the question, what have we done? combining with our terror.

(Mann 2006: 163)

The following fragment from Zheng’s “Pedestrian overpass” is only one of many which address exactly the feeling of terror present in Mann’s conceptual frame:

噢你开始倾听植物们的交谈，它们绿色的语言重金属的垃圾，一颗棕榈医生对病态的花草说着铅与镉的毒素，变异的黄是硫与锶-90 的杰作。玻璃的光源致使交通意外 136 次死亡 138 人，用钚代替钙生产的口服液，柔软的银白色的锡在空中浮荡，它们冲进你的肺叶与血管，砷在吞食着你们的性欲，汞杀死了河中的水藻与鱼类，硒是河道发出腥臭，浮在水面的塑料泡沫连同钢筋水泥 110 分贝生活环境扼杀了你所有的想象力。

(Zheng 2008: 95)

Oh, you start listening to the conversation of plants, the heavy metal waste of their green language, a palm doctor explains the toxicity of lead and cadmium to the diseased grasses, the variations of yellow are masterpieces by sulphur and strontium-90. LED lights caused the

¹¹⁵ To date *dagong* poetry has only once been discussed in connection with the field of ecocriticism, see Gong 2012.

deaths of 138 people in 136 traffic accidents, plutonium replaces calcium in the production of saliva, soft silvery tin floats in the air, rushing into your lungs and blood vessels, arsenic is eating up your sexual desire, mercury has killed the algae and the fish in the rivers, selenium makes the rivers stink, the plastic foam on the river's surface plus reinforced concrete the 110 decibel environment strangle every scrap of your imagination.

Mann's warning of the current terror, "indeed, we are at the mercy of the land, and the air, and the water – and what we've made of them" (2006: 162), clearly echoes in Zheng's poetry. Apart from injuries and vocational diseases, the deleterious impact of industrial waste and pollution on workers' bodies is one of the crucial motifs in Zheng's corporeal poetics. In contrast to the aforementioned empowerment reading of the female stigma by Cixous, Zheng's stigmata carry with them no fertilising or germinating powers. On the contrary, exposure to the chemical substances in plants often exposes the workers to the risk of infertility:

带毒的石油照耀我们病态的躯体，带毒的废气与垃圾污染了男人们的精子。

(Zheng 2008: 99, from "Pedestrian overpass")

Toxic petroleum shines on our diseased bodies, toxic fumes and waste have contaminated the semen of our men.

The representation of nature in Zheng's poetry is, however, not restricted to a description of the direct impact pollution has on the human bodies exposed to it. It expresses much more, deep feelings of grief and despair in view of the visible signs of ecological destruction. Thus Zheng bears witness to the annihilation of nature in a similar way as she does to the degeneration of human beings. Nature, like migrant workers, is not capable of talking back in its own defence. Furthermore, Nature is shown as sympathising with human suffering, anguish and mourning:

(...)一个人因为一颗星的陨落流泪 / 一棵树因为一个人的死而枯萎 (...)

(Zheng 2008: 98, from "Pedestrian overpass")

(...) somebody is crying for a fallen star / due to a man's death a tree withers (...)

Trees play a significant role in Zheng's lyrical imagery. She perceives them as maintaining an almost symbiotic relationship with human beings. In the countryside trees used to accompany the villagers on their life-journey from birth to death, as was the case, for example, with

Zheng's grandmother as described in "Shumu: Huanghucun jiyi" 树木：黄斛村记忆 (Trees: Memories from Huanghu Village)

(...)

寂静的树木；站在落日的余晖里

Quiet tree; standing in the sunset glow

砍伐的时间，年老的祖母

Tree-felling time, my aged grandmother

站在幽闭症的庭院里，沿着树木的泪水

standing in the claustrophobic courtyard, the tree's tears flow

她的传奇，巫术，端午的蟾蜍，长蛇..... (...)

And with them her stories, witchcraft, the toads and snakes for the Duanwu Festival...

(Zheng 2008: 147)

Zheng discovers family resemblance between men and trees but, significantly, she does not anthropomorphise nature. On the contrary, she transforms the human body into an arborescent shape that mimics trees:

(...) 剩下贫困中的亲人

(...) poor relatives remain

他们弯腰成根，将肉体与骨头扎进土中 (...)

they stoop and become roots, their flesh and bones dig into the earth (...)

(Ibid.: 148)

In contrast to the rural environment, in the industrial regions trees are sacrificed daily on the altar of modernisation and urbanisation. The destruction of plants seems to presage the imminent physical annihilation of migrant workers. Due to their rural origin, the displaced peasants are perceived by the poet as the descendants of trees and consequently linked to nature by an invisible umbilical cord. One of the prominent scenes of destruction documented by Zheng in her poetry is the transmutation of Qiaoli Village, which was swallowed up by the manufacturing hub of Dongguan City:

无名山峰晃动，它无法控制住身影

A nameless hilltop sways, it cannot control its shape

在打桩机的巨声中，一如奔赴大海的河流
 in the roar of a pile driver, like a river rushing towards the sea
 闪亮的鳍在阳光里涌动，我知道被挖掘机
 glittering fins emerge in the sunshine, I know on those
 刚削的丘陵上，栎树与荔枝，竹子与松树
 hills ploughed up by the excavators, the oak, the lychee, the bamboo and the pine
 它们低矮而忧郁的神色，巨大的铁手臂
 their scrubby and melancholy look, giant iron-armed
 推土机，重型卡车一座座小山运走 (...)

bulldozers, heavy trucks carry away the hills one after the other (...)

(Zheng 2009: 1, from “Zai Qiaoli” 在桥沥, In Qiaoli)

Even if Zheng's poetry is occasionally marked by a deep sense of nostalgia for the lost rural roots of the migrant workers, she is nevertheless aware of the fact that the ongoing transformation of the eco-space is possible only in this one destructive direction. The destruction cannot be reversed, and consequently a return to the preindustrial rural communities is no longer possible. Zheng's writing does not offer any hope of a feasible future restoration of the natural landscape. This disenchanting outlook similarly resonates in the absence of any promise of a possible restoration of the migrant worker's healthy body. Finally, anthropomorphic and floral bodies are all re-assembled into novel, unnatural forms by the meat grinder of the industrialising forces:

(...) 这是二十一世纪
 (...) this is the twenty-first century
 这是灰蒙蒙的机器，被砍伐的荔枝林
 this is dust-grey machinery, felled lychee trees
 它们倒下来，庭院化着瓦砾，大地的废墟
 down they come, the courtyard transforming into rubble, ruins of mother earth
 辽阔的大地被工业的火焰烧烤，累积，啊
 vast mother earth burnt up by the flames of the industrial era, accumulation, oh
 楼群，工厂，混泥土，从泥土到我
 buildings, factories, concrete, from clay to me
 从机器的手臂到我的手臂，玉米叶，水稻苗
 from machinery's arms to my arms, maize leaves, rice seedlings

我的肌肉，骨骼，皮毛都成了机器的一部分 (...)

my muscles, my bones, my skin, my hair have all become part of the machinery (...)

(Zheng 2009: 102, from “Bianyi de cunzhuang” 变异的村庄, Transmuted village)

Who's afraid of Zheng Xiaoqiong?

It is significant that the reception of lower strata writing is only documented as far as professional critics and academics are concerned. With their reviews and analyses they contributed to a growing awareness among the well-educated of the existence of this literature. There is, however, no reliable information available concerning the popularity of these texts among the migrant workers and displaced peasants themselves. From the view of the professional critique, lower strata works are frequently regarded as crude and immature, but simultaneously they are praised for their presumed authenticity. Consequently, migrant workers' literature is tacitly defined as realistic and subsumed to a testimonial function. This reading explains why it is precisely the almost ethnographic descriptions documenting the symptoms of bodily sufferings that compose the most widely received corpus of texts by migrant poets, while other, more sophisticated and complex poems have been widely ignored. Furthermore, critics tend to read these writings as expressing the standpoint of an entire collective, rather than as something written from the perspective of an individual subject. This tendency underlies the numerous homogenising readings which thematise the harsh existence of the entire lower strata of society, often as an object of pity, but are at the same time oblivious to the differences within this collective, and consequently myopic regarding the impact of gender or age.

In addition, there is something strangely disturbing about the academic-based critique's appraisal of the spectacle of the disenfranchised body in pain. Writing by migrant workers has often been celebrated by these professional readers, but seemingly only insofar as it voices indirect disapproval of the decadent, ego-centred, quasi-middle-class narratives of the body. For example, the influential academics Zhang Qinghua and Xie Youshun contrast the – in their opinion – valuable and morally superior lower strata writing with the decadent Glamlit or Lower Body poetry (Xie 2009, Zhang 2010). Others, like Xie Mian and Hong Zicheng identify the strength of this literature as originating from its marginal position (Yang 2009: 11-17, Sun 2012: 1002-1004).

From a broader, historical perspective the critical focus on the suffering body of the subaltern

classes may be connected to earlier phenomena from the republican and revolutionary eras. In her *National Past-Times* (1997) Ann Anagnost analysed “the circulation of violence between writing, the spoken word, and the body” as a mechanism central to the construction of the class subject in revolutionary China (1997: 19). The physical body was understood as representing the truth of historical processes. The suffering bodies of peasants first emerged in the realistic literature of the May Fourth intellectuals. A little later, during the revolutionary period, these bodies were empowered to speak for themselves, but only about the bitterness of the past feudal era. After the Cultural Revolution the topic of the body emerged again, but this time the injuries and sufferings of intellectuals were sewn up in the writing of the so-called “literature of the wounded” (伤痕文学 *shanghen wenxue*). Significantly, in migrant workers’ poetry the dual division between intellectuals’ writing and peasants’ speaking collapses for the first time. The subaltern bodies in pain and, simultaneously, those at the bottom of society, appear for the first time as capable of representing themselves in writing, no longer solely in repetitious oral performances. The writing of the body in pain, as already stated, seems to constitute an important moment in the construction of a subjectivity which successfully transgresses the shattering of language by physical suffering, and finally materialises on its own terms on the horizon of society. Instances such as the political engagement of Zheng Xiaoqiong for the increased integration of migrant workers into the urban environment show clearly that this stratum is no longer entirely dependent on intellectuals for its representation. This new subject, individual or multiple, constructs itself in writing with its own anti-modern, anti-capitalist, anti-Western, and anti-intellectual vocabulary. The collective, class or social strata-grounded identification is only one of the dimensions within which this emerging subjectivity articulates itself, while gender or environmentalism may be others. The intellectuals’ reading of lower strata writing seems however to resemble mainly what Anagnost characterises as typical for the first half of the twentieth century:

[T]he oppressed worker/ peasant/ woman made present in speech the larger historical forces of capitalism and imperialism bearing down on the nation. Indeed, the “speaking out” of the class subject became emblematic for China’s own emergent consciousness of a subaltern identity in the global community of nations. (1997: 9)

Consequently, on the side of the lower strata authors themselves there has been a growing consciousness of the fact that their words are occasionally twisted or abused in order to fit better into the intellectuals’ political and cultural agenda (Sun 2012: 1008). This applies

particularly to the class vocabulary that seems to lurk between the lines of the majority of the critical readings, and is not surprising in the light of Anagnost's analysis of the meaning of the suffering body for the construction of the suffering – but also intellectual – class. The migrant worker authors have however distanced themselves from such readings and opted for a more literary focused, humanistic perspective on their works:

I don't think my poems have anything to do with class consciousness. The word 'class' carries connotations of violence, and bitter memories of it are still part of people's consciousness. I don't write out of class consciousness. I am driven by an innate compassion for the weak and anger with injustice. [...] I think another word – strata (jie ceng) – may be more appropriate than class. However, when certain sentiments and feelings are not dissolved or defused in timely manner, strong class consciousness may indeed appear.

(Zheng Xiaoqiong quoted in Sun 2012: 1007)

So, to repeat Zhang Qinghua's question, what is the right vocabulary with the help of which writing of the lower strata could be approached? How to speak of the complex matrix of power relations oppressing the female workers of the Pearl River Delta without making use of the helpful language of intersectionality with its basic dimensions of gender and class? Zheng Xiaoqiong, together with many others, opposes class vocabulary, which is overshadowed by the memories of violence attached to it. As already discussed, her stigmatexts are attached to the bodily and social experience of the female gender. However, in many of her texts she shows an ambivalent stance towards feminism, which is part of an intellectual tradition that is not entirely hers. Nevertheless, among the majority of masculine, metropolitan texts by lower strata writers, her own appear as uncompromisingly feminine and provoking:

(...) 我以半个女权主义者倡议在本年度举行一次美男节，把男人们的阳具放在展览馆 T 型台像测量着女人们的乳房一样测量者它们。(...)

(Zheng 2009: 96, from "Pedestrian overpass")

(...) As a half-feminist I propose the organisation of a men's beauty pageant at the end of the year. Men's penises should be on show on the catwalk of an exhibition hall and judged in the same way women's breasts are judged. (...)

Zheng's poignant critique diagnoses the current injustice not only as an immediate byproduct of the currently operating global capitalist system, but also as something that is permeated by legacies of the patriarchal order. Furthermore, she acknowledges the existence of a

longlasting human history of instrumentalisation of some bodies by the more wealthy and powerful. From this point of view her texts echo opinions expressed by one of the early pioneers of emancipation, He-Yin Zhen 何殷震 (ca. 1884-1920?)¹¹⁶. In the introduction to the English rendition of her texts, the editors of the volume discuss the crucial concepts He established in her writings. These are 男女 *nannü* and 生计 *shengji*. *Nannü* has a broader meaning than the mere description of gender inequality. It points to the immanent hierarchical structure of society in which some groups easily become objects of exploitation by others. It is a political category of distinction, the power of which is “both metaphysical and physical – literally physical in the sense of cloistering, corseting, prostituting, punishing, enslaving, maiming, and abusing the body. Poor women, young girls, and lower-class boys were all susceptible to such marking and exploitation (...)” (Liu, Karl & Ko 2013: 37). Zheng’s bodies of pain are inscribed in the course of the operation of this branding. Furthermore, in spite of her female perspective, the poet, like He, does not leave out of view the existence of a similarly disenfranchised male collective. This group, however, does not suffer from the legacies of the long-lasting patriarchal tradition which make use of female bodies in a way utterly different from how it uses male bodies. The second crucial idea in He’s writing is that “shengji (livelihood) (...) supports the all-encompassing gendered lens with a radical critique of capitalism, modernity, coloniality, the state and imperial traditions” (Ibid.: 43). This critical focus may equally be attributed to Zheng’s poetry. Zheng, in unison with He’s early analyses, shows that factory work lures the female subject with a promise of emancipation, which will however never be fulfilled. They both negate the possibility of reimagining factory work as potentially free and autonomous. Not surprisingly, as they both emphasise the practice of the commodification of female bodies throughout history; prostitution figures prominently in He’s essays and Zheng’s poetry alike. The prostitute emerges as the product of a predatory industrialisation or, in Zheng’s poetry, as an allegory of the industrial era:

(...) 这首诗主体并非你理解的妓女，而是工业时代的命运。妓女只是一个很简单的隐，就是说在面对这个工业代，无论你是沦落为妓女，或者坚守变成螺母，命运都是一样，有莫名的忧伤 (...)

¹¹⁶ He-Yin Zhen (or He Zhen 何震) was one of the pioneers of anarcho-feminism in Asia. Together with her husband she formed the Society for the Restoration of Women’s Rights in Tokyo. In the official journal of the society radical ideas such as feminism, socialism, Marxism, and anarchism were introduced, sometimes for the first time, to the Chinese readership of the last decade of the Qing dynasty (Liu, Karl & Ko 2013: 83-84).

(Zheng 2010)¹¹⁷

(...) prostitution, as you understood it, is not the subject of this poem, but it is the fate of those [living in] the industrial era. The prostitute is only a simple metaphor. In other words, in the industrial era it does not matter if you fall into prostitution, or endure and become a screw in the machine. It is the same fate, one of ineffable grief and distress (...)

¹¹⁷ This quote originates from Zheng's response to the Jiangnan University-based critic Yu Yang's 余旻 article, in which he analysed her long poem "Mumian" 木棉, (Cotton), as condemning prostitution for immorality. See Yu 2010.

Coda

This project ends with an investigation into migrant workers' engagement with literature and particularly with poetic representations of the body. Even if the analysis of this new phenomenon may be only fragmentary and lacking in critical distance, it should not be omitted in any inquiry into the intersection of writing, gender and experience, a broader discussion to which this project hopes to contribute. This interconnectedness was observed here through the lens of the body discourses in contemporary Chinese literature and theory.

The beginning of the body turn within the field of literary production may be located in the early 1980s. Since then "the body" has become one of the generally accepted reference points in the critical discourse on literature. However, it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that the existence of this category of analysis was commonly acknowledged. This happened in reaction to the ban of the novels of Wei Hui and Mian Mian in the year 2000. These works by so-called "Beauty Writers" were labelled by the critique as examples of "body writing". This term only seldom referred to a larger theoretical framework and often remained a trendy buzzword, if not an implicit insult.

It is not surprising that the connection between "body" and "literature" entered the popular consciousness with reference to texts by female authors. Furthermore, the scandal of female sexuality and self-expression, which erupted in reaction to Wei Hui's public performances in particular, shows that her reinterpretation of the social role of women authors dangerously collided with accepted representations of femininity. Paradoxically, in an era of global hypervisibility of lightly clad heroines, Wei Hui's act momentarily exposed an invisible borderline which was not to be crossed. It was this historical moment which confirmed the popular understanding of "body writing" as exemplifying an ephemeral aesthetic overstepping of current literary conventions, rules of good taste and moral taboos. Consequently, even the majority of the professional readership – literary critics and academics – remained reluctant to include the body writing phenomenon in the corpus of contemporary Chinese literature. The dominant critical tone was that of condemnation of the Western and postmodern tendencies allegedly predominant in this writing.

It may, however, be convincingly argued that there is a connection between texts attributed to the body writing phenomenon and earlier women's writing. Yet few critics highlighted its affiliation to urban literature by earlier female authors. A detailed reading of texts by Wei Hui shows that her writing is rooted in a vocabulary similar to that of women's writing of the 1980s and early 1990s. Young well-educated women authors born in the 1970s may be

understood as carrying these earlier texts in their cultural baggage. Furthermore, they narrate themselves in terms which were first enabled by the previous “private writing” or “body narrations” of Lin Bai, Chen Ran or Xu Kun. Similarly, for the younger generations of women poets, women’s poetry of the late 1980s delivered a crucial orientation and departure point.

The contributions by the older cohorts of women writers, poets and theorists alike initiated the exploration of bodily poetics and rhetoric as a novel means of expressing the previously silenced corporeality. The subsequent textualisation of the formerly tabooed female body experience was an immediate reaction to the lifting of the somatophobic ban, but it was also simultaneously stimulated by a “belated” reception of Western feminist theories. Among them, the concept of *écriture féminine*, understood as an enabling, emancipatory and subversive force strong enough to endanger the patriarchal society from within, was important for a theoretical contextualisation of the budding women’s literature. Texts like “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous with its imagery of flying were essential for the constitution of a corpus of new vocabulary in which women writers re-represented themselves. Literary texts delivered an important space for a re-reading and re-writing of local and global feminist legacies in terms of empowering gender difference, namely as *nüxingzhuyi*. With this feminist neologism the former, revolutionary, notion of femininity as grounded in the negation of difference was exposed as a mere universalisation of the masculine body proper. Consequently it is not surprising that after 1976 the “body writ large” emerged in writing by intellectuals of both sexes, symbolically marking the end of the Maoist era. The re-introduction of the previously branded and dehumanised *niugui sheshen* (“ox monsters and snake spirits”)¹¹⁸ into literature was crucial in the process of bidding farewell to the revolutionary project. Its importance was acknowledged in the academic discussions about the body turn led, among others, by Nan (1996), Xie (2001), Ge and Song (2005). Re-inscribing corporeality into texts was an indispensable element in the “search for a new subject” (Cai 2004) conducted in writing by intellectuals in the 1980s and early 1990s. While women academics dedicated themselves to the organisation of a local institutional base for the emerging academic subjects of women’s and gender studies, women authors concomitantly struggled to establish literary spaces of their own. The emergence of a vivid discourse of women’s poetry in the late 1980s may be regarded as an initial and groundbreaking step in the

¹¹⁸ This metaphor originating from Buddhist folklore was imposed on intellectuals by Mao Zedong during the suppression of the “Hundred Flowers Movement” in 1957 and during the Cultural Revolution alike (Schwarcz 1998).

process of institutionalisation of women's literature on its own independent terms. It was however a novel by a male author, Jia Pingwa (b. 1952), which caused the greatest literary scandal of the 1990s, one which may seem comparable to that caused by the excesses of body writing. In 1993 *Feidu* was banned for many years for its pornographic content. This novel may be regarded as an example of the "misogynistic practice" (Lu 1995) of 1990s fiction. It has been argued that the resurrection of the representation of traditional submissive femininity may be read as the reaction of male intellectuals to women's rise to power under communism (Ibid.: 7) or to the diminishing role of the intellectual in the global capitalist system with its commercialised mass media (Cai 2004: 222-223). Accordingly, in the literature of the 1990s, the female body emerged within very different logics of representation in men and women's writing. The somatisation of femininity within men's fiction may be seen as less problematic. The woman as body emerged in these writings simply as a pleasing object of male gaze and desire. In women's fiction and poetry, however, the body stood at the centre of an emancipatory project, constructed not only in immediate reaction to the "iron girl" model of femininity inherent to socio-realist modes of representation, but also to the ongoing revival of the patriarchal tradition in male authors' writing.

This first struggle over the power to define femininity was conducted within women's poetry and women's private writing. The women authors tried then to negotiate the same aporia which was also to trouble the later body writing. Wanting to provide alternatives to the male-centred accounts, they sought ways to represent female body experience outside the patriarchal or revolutionary frameworks, but simultaneously without falling back into "the mire of biologism" (Grosz 1994: 188) as in male-authored fiction. Finally, the re-inscription of female body experience, together with the accompanying discussion of writing as grounded in distinct feminine consciousness, rendered problematic any writing that was declared as genderless and that was composed from a position outside the question of sexual difference. Consequently, even if the initially introverted, "gestational and aquatic" feminine corporeal poetics soon met its limits of expression, the matter of difference could not be erased any more. This first phase in the consolidation of women's writing may be seen as a preparatory one. After it had reached its end, women poets and writers opened themselves to society, but without losing the rediscovered sexually specific perspective. The poetics and rhetoric of their texts has changed and shifted gradually towards an inquiry into the ethics of sexual and gender difference. For example, Zhai Yongming has repeatedly pointed to the current unequal re-distribution of power and capital as reinforcing gender inequalities. Her growing criticism of present, but also historically rooted, discrimination lends a fresh and angry "female voice"

to her poetry.

Here perhaps the most important of the premises underlying this research project should be unveiled. The discussed period, covering the thirty years which passed from the official publication of Zhai Yongming's "Women" cycle to the issuing of *Records on women workers* by Zheng Xiaoqiong, is one of global change. This shift includes the transformation of China after the Cultural Revolution, the erosion and eventual fall of the iron curtain, the political stagnation and economic transformation initiated by Deng Xiaoping, ongoing globalisation, and the emergence, in this post-Cold War, post-socialist reality, of a China choking on its own pollution, but still "desiring" for more. This project tacitly acknowledges the relevance of poetry and poetics to the economic, geopolitical and social transformation of the last few decades. Poems written after the turn of the century, by Zhai Yongming and Zheng Xiaoqiong alike, respond to the socio-economic changes with an opening towards a global, or planetary (Spivak 2003: 71), perspective.¹¹⁹

Accordingly, the focus of corporeal discourses throughout the discussed timespan has resonated and shifted together with the socio-economical situation. The body turn was first initiated in close connection with and in critical reaction to women's writing as part of post-Mao intellectuals' search for new subject positions and means of articulation. Corporeal discourses opened an important channel of renegotiation of the meanings of gender difference. Later, when phenomena such as body writing and Lower Body poetry had brought the earlier female rhetoric and anti-humanist intellectual writing to a climax of intensity, the academic discourse moved on towards a critique of the commercialisation of sensual-cum-pornographic literature. However, this critique faced a novel situation in which the discussed corporeality and gender difference was not only expressed in writing, but also reenacted by authors during their public performances. Consequently, the body discourse in literature gained a novel visual and medial dimension. The enhanced visibility of, mainly, women authors and the reactions it elicited disclosed the legacies of a sexist and colonial logic underlying the functioning of the global publishing market. The appearance of a self-assured female persona unafraid of gender difference preceded the outward turn of women intellectuals' writing. In reaction to the growing awareness of social inequalities and divisions, women authors embraced their representational responsibility and turned to the disenfranchised classes or ethnic others (Schaffer & Song 2014: 53-76). What might however have come as a surprise was the fact that silenced and absent rural women were no longer all

¹¹⁹ Compare Edmond 2012: 1-14.

confined in their subaltern position. On the contrary, authors capable of self-representation, like Sheng Keyi or Zheng Xiaoqiong, with their own corporeal writing add new layers to the previously urban and quasi-middle-class focused body discourses. Like the literary undertakings of earlier intellectuals, their texts document the search for alternative self-representations, located outside the patriarchal, revolutionary, but also the prevailing popular imagery. For example, the vulnerable, pain-ridden lyrical image of “iron” in the global industrial era typical for Zheng Xiaoqiong’s “stigmatexts”, provides a suggestive counterpoint to the heroic “iron girls” and “iron men” of the era of intense industrialisation. In conclusion, it may be said that the current body discourses question and destabilise the ritualised celebration of modernisation and development. Zhai Yongming and Zheng Xiaoqiong’s corporeal poetics, with their growing anger over gender inequalities and grief about the destruction of nature, voice a poetic response to a world which declines responsibility for others.

Glossary

Bao Xiaolan	鲍小兰	
Cai Xiang	蔡翔	
Can Xue	残雪	
Cao Kefei	曹克非	
Cao Shuying	曹疏影	
<i>caogenxing</i>	草根性	grassroot-ness
Chen Ran	陈染	
Chen Shunxin	陈顺馨	
Chen Xiaofan	陈小繁	
Chen Xiaoming	陈晓明	
<i>cisheng</i>	雌声	female voice
Cui Weiping	崔卫平	
<i>dagong wenxue</i>	打工文学	migrant workers' literature
Dai Jinhua	戴锦华	
Dai Lai	戴来	
<i>Dangdai Guoji Shitan</i>	当代国际诗坛	<i>Contemporary International Poetry</i>
Du Fu	杜甫	
<i>diceng shengcun zhong de xiezu</i>	底层生存中写作	writing among the lower strata
<i>diceng wenxue</i>	底层文学	literature of the lower strata
Fan Fan	饭饭	
<i>fanshen</i>	翻身	empowerment
<i>funü</i>	妇女	woman, women
<i>funü yanjiu</i>	妇女研究	women's studies
Ge Hongbing	葛红兵	
<i>gerenhua xiezu</i>	个人化写作	individualised writing
Hai Nan	海男	
Han Dong	韩东	
He Yinzen	何殷震	
<i>hou renminxing</i>	后人民性	post-people-ness
Huang Lihai	黄礼孩	
Huang Ziping	黄子平	
Huangpu Mei	黄甫枚	

Jin Renshun	金仁顺	
<i>jinyuzhuyi</i>	禁欲主义	asceticism
Lan Lan	蓝蓝	
Li Shangyin	李商隐	
Li Xiaojiang	李小江	
Li Xiaoyu	李小雨	
Lin Bai	林白	
Lin Danya	林丹娅	
Lin Shuming	林树明	
Liu Tao	刘涛	
Lu Yimin	陆忆敏	
Lü Yu	吕约	
<i>meinü zuojia</i>	美女作家	the “Beauty Writers”
Meng Yue	孟悦	
<i>menglong shi</i>	朦胧诗	misty poetry
Mengzi	孟子	
Mian Mian	棉棉	
Mo Yan	莫言	
Nan Fan	南帆	
<i>nanxing xiezu</i>	男性写作	men’s writing
<i>nüquanzhuyi</i>	女权主义	egalitarian feminism
<i>nüxing</i>	女性	feminine, female
<i>nüxing shige</i>	女性诗歌	women’s poetry
<i>nüxing xiezu</i>	女性写作	women’s writing
<i>nüxing yishu</i>	女性艺术	women’s art
<i>nüxingzhuyi shige</i>	女性主义诗歌	feminist poetry
<i>nüxingzhuyi</i>	女性主义	feminism of sexual / gender difference
<i>nüxingzhuyi lichang</i>	女性主义立场	feminist standpoint
Ouyang Jianghe	欧阳江河	
<i>Piaochong Jushe</i>	瓢虫剧社	“Ladybird Theatre”
Qiao Yigang	乔以刚	
<i>qishi hou</i>	七十后	post-70s generation
<i>routi zhuyi</i>	肉体主义	flesh-ism

<i>shehui xingbie</i>	社会性别	gender
Shen Haobo	沈浩波	
Sheng Keyi	盛可以	
Sheng Ying	盛英	
<i>shenti huayu</i>	身体话语	body discourse
<i>shenti xiezuo</i>	身体写作	body writing
<i>shenti xiuci</i>	身体修辞	bodily figures of speech
<i>shenti xiucixue</i>	身体修辞学	body rhetoric
<i>shenti xushi</i>	身体叙事	body narration
<i>Shi yu ren</i>	《诗与人》	<i>Poetry and People</i>
<i>Shikan</i>	《诗刊》	<i>Poetry Periodical</i>
<i>sirenhua xiezuo</i>	私人化写作	privatised writing
Song Geng	宋耕	
Sun Shaoxian	孙绍先	
Tan Zhengbi	谭正壁	
Tang Danhong	唐丹鸿	
Tang Xiaodu	唐晓渡	
Tang Yaping	唐亚平	
Tie Ning	铁凝	
<i>wan shengdai</i>	晚生代	the late-born generation
Wang Xiaoni	王小妮	
Wei Hui	卫慧	
Wei Wei	魏微	
<i>wenxue shentixue</i>	文学身体学	literary somatics
Wu Ang	巫昂	
Xiao An	小安	
Xiao Gang	晓钢	
Xiao Jun	小君	
<i>xiabanshen</i>	下半身	the Lower Body
<i>Xiabanshen</i>	《下半身》	<i>Lower Body</i>
Xie Mian	谢冕	
Xie Youshun	谢又顺	
<i>xin renlei</i>	新人类	new humankind

<i>xin xin renlei</i>	新新人类	new new humankind
<i>xin shengdai</i>	新生代	newborn generation
<i>Xinshi Pinglun</i>	新诗评论	<i>New Poetry Review</i>
<i>xingbie</i>	性别	sex, sexual difference
<i>xingbie yanjiu</i>	性别研究	gender studies
<i>Xingxing</i>	《星星》	<i>Stars</i>
Xu Kun	徐坤	
Xue Tao	薛涛	
Xunzi	荀子	
Yang Ping	杨萍	
<i>Yi</i>	《翼》	<i>Wings</i>
Yi Lei	伊蕾	
Yin Lichuan	尹丽川	
Yu Hua	余华	
Yu Jian	余坚	
Yu Xuanji	鱼玄机	
Zhai Yongming	翟永明	
Zhang Jingyuan	张京媛	
Zhang Qinghua	张清华	
Zhang Xiaohong	张晓红	
Zhang Yimou	张艺谋	
Zhang Zhen	张真	
Zhao Bo	赵波	
Zheng Ling	郑玲	
Zheng Min	郑敏	
Zheng Xiaoqiong	郑小琼	
Zhou Jieru	周洁茹	
Zhou Zan	周瓚	
Zhu Wen	朱文	
Zhu Wenying	朱文颖	
<i>Zuojia</i>	《作家》	<i>Writers</i>
<i>Zuopin</i>	《作品》	<i>Literary Works</i>

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Zhang, Xiaohong (Zhang, Hong Jeanne) 张晓红. (2003). “Shili Shiwai – Yu Hai Nan Tan Wenxue Chuangzuo he Xingbie Huayu” 诗里诗外 — 与海男谈文学创作和性别话语 (Inside and outside of poetry – A conversation with Hai Nan on literary creativity and gender discours). In Huang, Lihai & Bu, Yongtao, *Shige yu ren. Zhongguo nüshiren fangtanlu*, 53-60.

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- . (2007). *Touguo shige xiezu de qianwangjing* 透过诗歌写作的潜望镜(Through the periscope of poetic writing). Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

JUSTYNA ALEKSANDRA JAGUŚCIK

*06.11.1979 in Warsaw (Poland)

Address: University of Zurich
Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies – East Asian Studies
Zurichbergstrasse 4
8032 Zurich
Switzerland

Phone: +41 44 634 31 83

E-mail: justyna.jaguscik@aoi.uzh.ch

EDUCATION

	2014	Dissertation submitted. Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Zurich and Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw (joint doctoral degree / <i>cotutelle de thèse</i>), <i>Summa cum laude</i> .
M.A.	2007	Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw.
M.A.	2003	Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Warsaw.
Matura (A-Level)	1998	High school, Poland.

EDUCATION AT OTHER INSTITUTIONS

2008	One-year postgraduate program in Gender Studies, Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences.
2003-2005	Language Scholarship, Beijing Language and Culture University, PRC.
1991-1995	Junior high school, Germany.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2013 (Jan - Feb)	Visiting scholar at the Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University. Aims: Library research and international cooperation and exchange necessary for the completion of the final stage of my Ph.D. thesis.
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- 2010
(Aug - Sep) Visiting scholar at the Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.
During this two-month stay I participated in the academic life of the Department for Contemporary Literature of the CASS under the supervision of Dr. Zhou Zan. I also conducted library research and interviews with Chinese writers and academics.
- 2009-2011 Doctoral student at the University Research Priority Program “Asia and Europe”, University of Zurich.
- 2007-2009 Doctoral student at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw.

GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS

- 2012 Forschungskredit (Candoc), University of Zurich. Funding granted for the completion of my Ph.D. thesis at the University of Zurich (CHF 50,255).
- 2012 (Together with Laura Coppens and Jessica Imbach) Graduate Campus Grant, University of Zurich. For the organization of the international Graduate Student Workshop “Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies” in Zurich (CHF 5,000).
- 2010 Ph.D. Student Exchange Grant, Sino-Swiss Science and Technology Cooperation & Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Granted for the research project “Speaking as a woman. Contemporary Chinese women’s literature and the concept of female *body writing* in the light of postcolonial / subaltern studies” conducted in Beijing (CHF 2,000 & CNY 16,250).
- 2009 Research grant, Central and Eastern Europe Program, University of Zurich (CHF 9,600).
- 2008-2009 (Together with Prof. Lidia Kasarello, University of Warsaw) Research Grant, Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation. For the research project “The abnormal / grotesque body phenomena in contemporary Chinese literature” (EUR 1,000).
- 2008 European Association for Chinese Studies, Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation Library Travel Grant. For a one-week visit for specialized research at the Sinological library of the University of Heidelberg (EUR 700).

WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2014- Lecturer and postdoctoral research fellow in Chinese Studies at the University of Zurich
- 2013-2014 Consultant for the research project “Employee Turnover in China and in Switzerland” conducted by the Department of Business Administration – Chair in Human Resource Management, University of Zurich.
- 2011-2014 Teaching and Research Assistant to Prof. Dr. Andrea Riemenschnitter, Department of Chinese Studies, University of Zurich.

2007-2009 Lecturer in Chinese Language, Warsaw School of Social Psychology.

SCHOLARLY SERVICE

- 2014- Field Editor for *Chinese Literature Dissertation Reviews*
(<http://dissertationreviews.org/east-south-and-southeast-asia/chinese-literature>).
- 2011-2014 Co-organization of international conferences and workshops at the University of Zurich (International Workshop "Ghosts in Asian Cinemas," Graduate Student Workshop "Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies").
- 2008-2009 Library Assistant, Department of Chinese Studies, University of Warsaw.

PUBLICATIONS

Peer-Reviewed Journals:

- Riemenschnitter, A., Imbach, J. & Jagusick, J. (2014). "Foreword." *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese. Special Issue on "Recognizing Ghosts"* 12.1: 8-12.
- Jagusick, J. (2014). "'The Woman Attempting to Disrupt the Ritual': Representations of Femininity and the Poetics of the Subaltern Body in Contemporary Chinese Female-Authored Pottery." *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 3: 60-70.
- Jagusick, J. (2013). "Zhai Yongming reads Frida Kahlo: Autohistorias." *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 4: 1301-1325.
- Jagusick, J. (2011). "Cultural Representation and Self-Representation of Dagongmei in Contemporary China." *DEP – Deportate, Esuli e Profughe*, 17: 121-138 (online).
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- Jagusick, J. (2011). "Zhai Yongmings lyrische Topographien (*Frauen*, "Kaffeehauslieder" und "New York 2006")." *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 1: 93-112.
- Jagusick, J. (2010). "From Women's Poetry to the Lower Body: Notes on the Chinese Body Writing," in Marcin Jacoby (ed.), *China Past and Present: New Polish Papers in Chinese Studies*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 170-179.
- Jagusick, J. (2008). "Dyskusje wokół struktury społecznej i klasy średniej w Chinach" (Changes in Social Structure and the Emerging Middle Class in the People's Republic of China). *Sociological Studies* 4: 91-113. (in Polish)

Non peer-reviewed:

- Jagusick, J. (2012). "Chińska klasa średnia: między 'noworyszami' a 'mrówkami'. Nowy język socjologii struktur społecznych w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej" (The Chinese Middle Class: between the new reach and the 'aunts.' New vocabulary in sociological approaches to stratification in Mainland China) in Waldemar Jerzy Dziak (ed.), *Chiny w XXI wieku. Perspektywy Rozwoju*. Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 167-181. (in Polish)
- Jagusick, J. (2010). "Im Labyrinth der Geschichte(n). Erinnerung und Vergessen in Ge Feis Erzählungen." *Orientierungen Zeitschrift zur Kultur Asiens* 2: 30-48.
- Jagusick, J. (2005). "Matki i córki – Literatura tworzona przez emigrantki chińskie jako stadium adaptacji kulturowej ich rodzin do życia w Stanach Zjednoczonych" (Mothers and Daughters. Chinese

Diaspora Literature as a Study of Family Adaptation in the USA). *Migration and Society* 10: 313 – 337. (in Polish)

Reviews:

- Jaguścik, J. (2014). “Huber, Jörg / Zhao Chuan (eds.): *The Body at Stake: Experiments in Chinese Contemporary Arts and Theatre*.” *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 1: 407-412.
- Jaguścik, J. (2012). “Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies. Graduate Student Workshop” (online). Available from: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39915>.
- Jaguścik, J. (2010). “Identitäten in Bewegung. Migration im Film” (online). Available from: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=2990>.

Translation:

- Coppens, L., **Jaguscik, J.** & Riefert, C. (2011). “Rey Chow ‘Film und Kulturelle Identität’”, in Bettina Dennerlein Bettina, Elke Frietsch (eds.), *Identitäten in Bewegung. Migration im Film*. Bielefeld: transcript (English - German), 19-32.

Interview:

- (2012) 翟永明: 与杨爽 (Justyna Jaguscik)一席访谈 *Zhai Yongming: yu Yang Shuang yi xi fangtan* (Interview with Zhai Yongming). *New Poetry Review* (评论新诗 *Pinglun xinshi*) 2: 255-276. (in Chinese)

TALKS AND PRESENTATIONS

- International Workshop “Humanistic Scholarship and the Anthropocene. Approaching China from a Sustainability Paradigm,” University of Zurich, May 17, 2015.
- XX Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies, Braga, Jul 24, 2014.
- Confucius Institute at the University of Basel, Mar 20, 2014.
- International Workshop “Biography afield in Asia and Europe,” University of Zurich, Sep 21, 2012.
- International Graduate Student Workshop “Asian Postmodernities and their Legacies,” University of Zurich, Mar 30, 2012.
- Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Toronto, Mar 17, 2012.
- Postgraduate Workshop on Culture and the State in Contemporary China, University of Oxford, Jun 3, 2011.
- Joint Conference of the Association for Asian Studies & International Convention of Asia Scholars, Honolulu, Apr 2, 2011.
- “Dongbei Workshop” of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Mishan (PRC), Feb 13, 2011.
- 5th WAGNet Graduate Workshop – “Women and Gender in Chinese Studies,” University of Westminster, London, Jan 30, 2011.

- Institute of Literature, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, Sep 28, 2010.
- Inaugural Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities “East meets West,” Osaka, Jun 20, 2010.
- 6. Schweizerische Nachwuchstagung der Asienwissenschaften
Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft / Schweizerische Gesellschaft Mittlerer Osten und Islamische Kulturen, Universitärer Forschungsschwerpunkt „Asien-Europa,“ Monte Verità (Switzerland), May 5, 2010.
- Conference “China Past and Present,” Department of Chinese Studies, University of Warsaw, Nov 29, 2009.
- Symposium to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Spring “From Democracy Wall to Internet,” Chiang Ching-kuo International Sinological Centre at Charles University, Prague, Dec 5, 2008.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Member, European Association for Chinese Studies